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the spinafex effect

developing a theory of change for communities

KATHRYN HANDLEY, SHERYLL HORN, RIPEKA KAIPUKE, BRUCE MADEN,
ELIZABETH MADEN, BARBARA STUCKEY, ROBYN MUNFORD, JACKIE SANDERS

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The spinafex plant provides a central metaphor for expressing the theory of change at Te Aroha Noa Community Services. This picture was painted for the project by Elizabeth Berkahn, a local artist and long time trustee at Te Aroha Noa.

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**All the staff, families and whānau who share in Te
Aroha Noa Community Services**

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this report we share the Te Aroha Noa Community Services (Te Aroha Noa) theory of change. What is written here provides one way of talking about the Te Aroha Noa approach to understanding the ways in which families and whānau embark upon and sustain themselves through ambitious change journeys. The report provides a brief overview of a two-year process of reflection, critique and practice development, and highlights some of the key practice learning from this project. It also provides some suggestions about the ways in which other family/whānau and community organisations could develop their own theories of change by reflecting on their practice to become more intentional about the work they do.

Theories of change provide organisations with the opportunity to articulate the way in which they understand their role and contribution to whānau/family change. They provide frameworks for considering more abstract, conceptual and value-related aspects of practice as well as particular intervention techniques and strategies that create change. The process of developing a theory of change lets practitioners think widely about their work as they draw connections between this work and the other processes in the lives of families and whānau. In this way, the theory

of change development process allows practitioners to reflect upon the way in which different types of responses work at different levels – from the individual (including psychological processes) to the systemic – in an integrated and holistic way. The resultant theory can provide a framework which recognises how practice moves beyond individualised, crisis-related and problem-saturated work (Warren-Adamson, 2001) to integrated, strengths-based work that has responsive and opportunistic characteristics.

We have divided the report into four sections. We begin by providing a brief overview of Te Aroha Noa and situating its practice theoretically. We then explore the theory generated in this project in action by considering two practice stories. Next, we elaborate upon the theory by exploring some of the key concepts developed during the project. Finally, we introduce some key reflection questions and suggest a process by which other organisations might begin to develop their own theory of change.

This report is primarily a practice document; we hope it will speak to practitioners in various social service organisations that work with families/whānau and communities to create change. In the next chapter we provide an overview of Te Aroha Noa to provide a context for the report.

2. TE AROHA NOA COMMUNITY SERVICES

This chapter identifies Te Aroha Noa Community Services beginnings and its progress over a 20-year time span. It also describes the focus at Te Aroha Noa on innovative practice and considers the theoretical roots of the organisation's practice.

2.1 Beginnings¹

Te Aroha Noa began its journey as a counselling service based in the Palmerston North suburb of Highbury. Initiated by the Central Baptist Church in the late 1980s, the service has developed into an integrated community centre. During the 1990s it added a range of group and individual parenting programmes to the counselling service, and also ran a playgroup in the back room of a local church. Later it opened a second-hand shop which still provides low-cost clothing and household items to local families and whānau. The early playgroups provided a safe, welcoming venue where parents could extend their understanding of their children's social and developmental needs and learn new strategies for responding to them, while at the same time gaining support from each other. Through contact with Te Aroha Noa, many parents have gained the confidence to seek out further opportunities for their own development and to address personal issues that restrict their capacity to be the parents they wish to be. Starting from a crowded base, the early childhood activities have now grown into a fully licensed early childhood facility. This is a safe, neutral space that is well resourced to meet the developmental needs of young children and to support their parents. The commissioning of this new early learning facility represented another important development – it physically moved the playgroup and the families and whānau connected with it to the same location as the other services provided by Te Aroha Noa. This opened up the possibility for playgroup families and whānau to meet therapeutic and whānau and family support staff informally as they went about their work. As a result, these services seem less remote and intimidating and are more easily accessible.

In addition to the early learning programme, Te Aroha Noa also offers a range of therapeutic and whānau/family development programmes: it provides the transition-to-school programme called HIPPY, and has developed literacy programmes that enable participants to gain driver's licences, learn to use computers and develop various other skills and expertise. It now provides an out-reach social work and community development programme, and is active in developing innovative approaches to reducing family/whānau violence. These services are available for the whole community, but are often accessed by families who have first come to the early childhood service. Te Aroha Noa has an active practice teaching programme, which makes significant contributions to academic and in-service development courses at Massey University's Social Policy and Social Work Programme and at the Bethlehem Tertiary Institute. Since 2004 Te Aroha Noa has made a commitment to building practice research capacity to advance its own capacity to innovate, and also to make a wider contribution to the development of social and community practice nationally and internationally. This report is one important product from this part of its work programme.

2.2 Growth and development

Te Aroha Noa has developed its own approach to fostering a learning community where the parents and children of the Highbury community grow in confidence and in their capacity to create a safe, supportive and dynamic community. Te Aroha Noa is part of a growing international movement that recognises the value of local responses to local needs. It is an integrated community centre (Lightburn & Sessions, 2006; Warren-Adamson, 2001) that is grounded in the rich and diverse culture of Highbury.

2.3 Innovative practice

Te Aroha Noa is at the cutting edge of innovation in whānau and family practice. It has focused intentionally on developing practice in response to the twin imperatives of locally-articulated need and internationally recognised best practice. The blending of early childhood, child development, individual counselling, community-based social work and

¹ For more information on the work of Te Aroha Noa, see its website <http://www.tearohanao.org.nz/>

adult education all delivered from a locally-situated community centre places it at the forefront of practice development. Staff have an ongoing commitment to developing practice and to reflecting upon the way in which they engage with local whānau and families. It was thus a valuable place to work on developing a theory of change.

Te Aroha Noa has developed practice over two decades and in this time has blended several major theoretical strands into its work. Structural theories (see, for example, Giddens, 1984) link individual circumstances to wider socio-political factors. They focus attention on how factors beyond the control of individuals interact with those factors over which they do have control to shape both their circumstances and their responses.

Structural analysis focuses on power relationships that limit family and whānau potential and the possibilities within particular communities. It involves working to change policies that intentionally or otherwise damage or undermine the capacity of families, whānau and neighbourhoods to care well for their members.

Ecological perspectives encourage practitioners to think in terms of circles of relationships around individuals and families and whānau, and to recognise the ways in which differing levels and types of relationships shape the approach to finding solutions. Championed first by Bronfenbrenner (1979), ecological theories orient practitioners to the different 'nested' systems of relationships and processes around children and their whānau or families. Thinking of relationships and processes as operating at different levels connects ecological thinking to structural analysis.

Educational theories as theories of growth and development also shape Te Aroha Noa's kaupapa. Education is understood as a fundamental human drive that occurs throughout the course of life. The Frierean (Friere, 1985) approach to education as emancipation and liberation is critical at Te Aroha Noa. Ako shapes the Te Aroha Noa approach to thinking about education; it means that everyone is simultaneously

a teacher and a learner. This allows practitioners to demonstrate respect for the knowledge and experience of the parent, the child, the others who become involved in change journeys. This means practitioners will understand that this knowledge and experience may only be revealed gradually by parents, children and others as the support relationship builds and, importantly, as trust builds between them and the practitioner.

Strengths-based approaches fit well with the structural, educational and ecological theories. They are fundamentally collaborative, transparent and respectful. A major contribution that strengths-based approaches bring to practice development is the centrality of clients in the change process. This has important implications for the way in which practitioners work on change with clients (Munford & Sanders, forthcoming; Saleebey 1997, 2006). The strengths perspective recognises that whānau and families create change, and practitioners are not necessarily the only or even the most important experts in these processes. Practitioners can support, encourage and question, but they do not create the change, nor do they have to live with it. At Te Aroha Noa this recognition manifests itself in descriptions of practitioner orientation as 'surrendering the self' and engaging in a process of 'becoming empty' in order to create the internal and external spaces (sometimes described as hospitality) for the 'other' to grow and become fully present in the encounter. Strengths perspectives help workers to look widely around whānau and families, learning about the things that they do well and harnessing them to work on the challenges they face.

We now turn our attention to the Te Aroha Noa theory of change in action. Chapter 3 considers two case examples that were used to provide a grounding for discussion during the theory of change development process. The case examples illustrate different ways of thinking about the theory of change, and allow us to learn more about how to connect theory to practice in the daily work of social service organisations.

3. THE THEORY IN ACTION

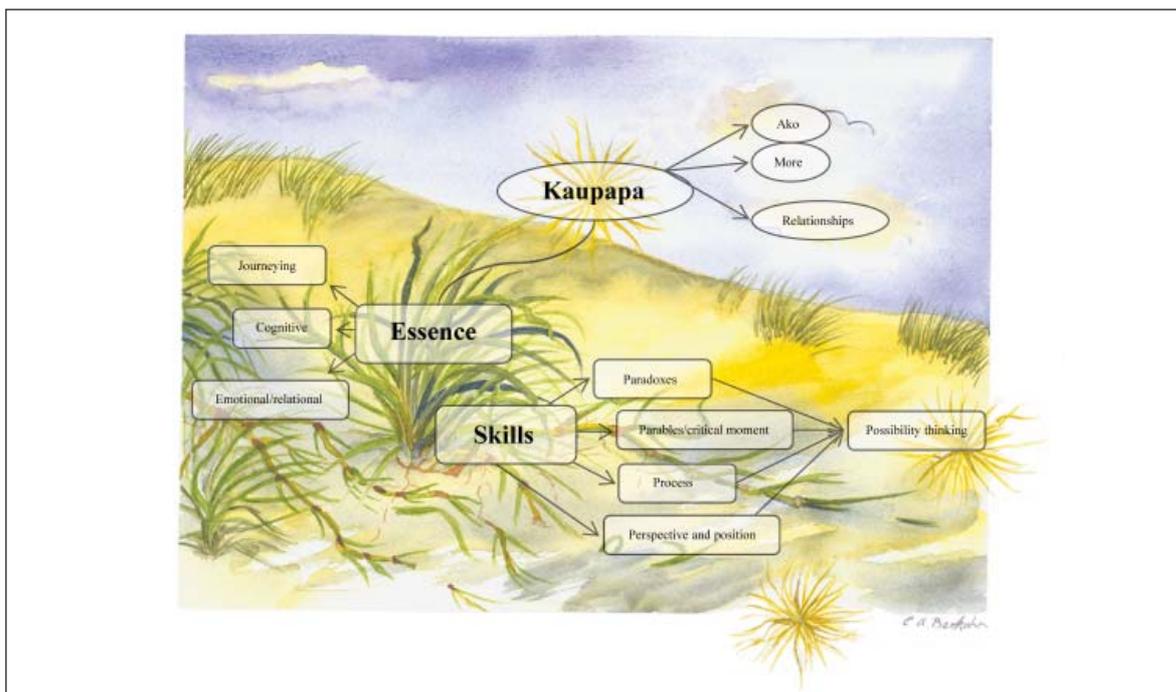
3.1 Introduction – the theory in brief

Te Aroha Noa uses the spinafex plant as a metaphor to explain their theory of change. This theory has three elements (kaupapa, essence, skills) which together are made up of 10 conceptual components. As an integrated theory, the conceptual components form threads across the three elements. For instance, each element contains a relational component. Reflecting their approach to practice, in developing the theory, Te Aroha Noa staff used narrative and metaphor. The metaphor of the spinafex helped encapsulate the theory, and it is used below to diagrammatically represent it. We explain the spinafex and the way it helps us to think about the theory of change in more detail in Chapter 4.

Developing a theory of change is an exploratory and developmental journey for an organisation. This journey involves practitioners, families and whānau standing outside of support interactions so that they can reflect upon how interventions fit into their lives and examine the wider ripple effects that interventions can have

beyond responses to immediate needs. They help organisations to learn about the way in which they contribute to whānau and family change, and also to learn about the potential they have to contribute to wider community-level and social change. We explore this in more detail later in this chapter where we consider the example of the playground initiative. The process of developing a theory of change provides practitioners with the opportunity to think widely about their work as they draw connections between this work and the other processes in the lives of families and whānau and in the communities where they live.

In addition to the theory of change developed within Te Aroha Noa, complexity theory has been of value in explaining the nature of its work (Kaplan, 2002; Reeler, n.d.; Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006). The following discussion thus both draws upon Te Aroha Noa's own theory of change, as illustrated in the preceding diagram, and highlights areas where complexity theory has helped build understanding of the nature of its work. Chaos or complexity theories have a long pedigree in the physical sciences and in mathematics where they have been developed to explain systems that do not maintain a steady state, and where patterns do not ever exactly replicate themselves. They have recently begun to gain traction in the social



sciences where the need to explain contradictory or paradoxical phenomena, tension and uncertainty and to actively understand how to provoke and promote positive change is a key concern. Traditional theories in social work have drawn strongly from systems and ecological theories, which explain circularity, stability and interdependence (Morrison, 2005). But these theories have not accommodated explanations of change so well. Uncertainty and unpredictability, contradiction and tension are all key features of social organisation, and understanding them is critical if we are to know how to stimulate, provoke and support positive change. Complexity theory seems to provide possibilities for actively accounting for dynamic, open, adaptive systems, and for systems that are more than the sum of their parts. In this way it seems to offer potential to help us think about the diverse and sometimes paradoxical ways in which social support seems to work out in the lives of families and whānau and to consider the wider effects that interventions can have beyond the immediate lives of those involved:

Complexity theory looks at the world in ways that break with simple cause-and-effect models, linear predictability, and a reductionist, atomistic approach to understanding phenomena, replacing them with organic, non-linear and holistic approaches (Santonus, 1998, p. 3) in which relations within interconnected and interdependent networks are fundamental (Morrison, 2005, p 316).

Some key concepts in chaos or complexity theory that have particular resonance with social work include the non-proportional relation between cause and effect, or, as it applies in social work, the notion that small initial inputs can have large effects later. Because it is centrally concerned with change over time, sensitivity to initial conditions is an important concept in chaos theory. Social workers need to understand how to connect to emerging possibilities for change, to harness what already exists and identify what could contribute to positive and enduring change. A final concept which is important in complexity theory and which had particular resonance in the Te Aroha Noa Community Services theory of change is the fundamental significance of relationships.

3.2 Applying the theory to practice

The remainder of this chapter is structured around two case examples from practice at Te Aroha Noa that

demonstrate the key dimensions of the theory of change in action. In keeping with the way in which Te Aroha Noa uses narrative to communicate critical learning that underpins change, we recount stories to illustrate how the theory of change works out in action. The first story has several layers, and in this discussion we consider four of them. At the first level the story is about a process of engaging the local City Council in a dialogue over the redevelopment of the children's playground that sits alongside Te Aroha Noa in the centre of the Highbury community. This layer involves the elaboration of a process of urban development – the re-creation of usable public spaces that provide for families and whānau. This level of the story in particular demonstrates kaupapa components – ako and relationships; essence components – emotional/relational and cognitive; and skills components – perspective, process, paradox and parable/critical moment. At this layer, the story illustrates core components of the theory of change: kaupapa, essence and skills. This illustrates ways of managing relationships so that community members and public officials can work collaboratively on shared projects and engage in public conversations about the development of services.

Underneath this narrative are other stories that tell us about the ripple effects that good processes and relationships stimulate. These other stories are synergistic and demonstrate dimensions of kaupapa (more, relationships and ako) and essence (cognitive and journeying aspects), and they illustrate the ways in which the practice orientation can be used to release creative energy through positive management of paradox, constructive use of process and recognition of the ways in which perspective and position shape interaction and understanding. Taken together, the stories of the children's playground become a valuable parable that adds to the Te Aroha Noa oral history and provides an opportunity to rehearse the theory of change. It also forms part of other collective and individual stories of growth and change that help shape the ongoing biographies of the people involved and their wider communities of interest. We draw out a number of these other stories to demonstrate the diverse ripple effects that emerge out of Te Aroha Noa practice.

3.3 Story One – the playground initiative

The discussion below considers four layers, or different stories that can be told about the playground initiative. They are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Each layer is introduced with a piece of narrative from a key protagonist in that particular layer of the story. This is followed by a brief discussion which elaborates the connections with the Te Aroha Noa theory of change.

3.3.1 Layer 1 – small beginnings

We had only just begun to think in terms of the way in which we were connected to the community around us when we received a community consultation document in our mail box from the City Council about how the Farnham Ave Playground was going to be redeveloped. We thought this initiative is small, it is visible, it is local, it is a positive project that should result in benefits to local people. We talked to some of the parents who lived around Farnham Park and realised that consultation via the letterbox does not always work well; *kanohi-te-kanohi* (face-to-face) is a better way to do things here and so we thought that renovating the park would benefit from face-to-face discussion. Even if it doesn't result in different outcomes, there are always unexpected benefits from getting people together to talk. We talked to some of the parents at the Early Learning Centre and decided that the best way was to call a hui, a meeting. Two of our staff door-knocked all around the community and asked people to come to a hui to discuss our playground. We also asked the City Council to attend to listen to the views of the local people. They initially were very cautious of this. We gained the impression that their past experiences of attending public meetings had not been positive; it appeared to us that experiences had felt like being devoured by hostile residents! Also, meeting people can be time consuming, expensive and it can mean that the only people who get heard are those who attend the meeting. However they did agree to send a consultant out to hear what locals were thinking.

It was good that they responded positively to us asking to meet someone face-to-face because 25 people came to the meeting. They gave a lot of positive feedback about this initiative; positive feedback that the Council would never have heard

otherwise. There was an animated discussion at the hui and many practical and creative ideas were generated. This included identifying the need for fencing off the playground so that children didn't run out on the street while parents were playing with another of their children. They wanted to be involved in planning. They also suggested the value of being involved in planting around the playground so that they could have a feeling that the park was theirs. They wanted a big grassed area left for touch rugby games between fathers and their sons. This was an important use already being made of the grassed area adjacent to the play equipment and parents wanted to be sure that the renovation of the park would take this into account. They wanted the broken glass picked up and seats to sit on. They wanted mats under the equipment rather than bark so that broken glass could easily be picked up. They were surprised at how much expertise they had and how Council planners hadn't thought of things that were obvious to them! They wanted their park and their suburb to have *mana*, so that it would not continue to be seen as a place where bad things happen. *Bruce, Director of Te Aroha Noa*

In terms of complexity theory, we can explain the City Council's initial response to the invitation to attend the hui as illustrating the fact that system balance or equilibrium is not always positive. The Council had learnt that engaging in open discussion with communities posed risks, could be costly to manage and could also exclude people who could not attend meetings or did not feel comfortable speaking in public. Planning processes do require consultation, but this can be managed in different ways – by sending out a survey form by mail, or by meeting people face-to-face, for instance. Consultation processes have, over time, assumed a particular form, and most of the time this worked, allowing Council processes to move forward. However, by approaching the consultation process from a different angle the Council gained the benefit of meeting and working directly with local people, and this ripple effect can be seen in layers two and four of the story as well.

The way in which the consultation process unfolded demonstrates *ako* in action – the parents had much valuable expertise, and also held critical information about the many different ways in which this space was used (uses that extended beyond its role as

a playground, and which had whānau and family development and community-building characteristics).

We asked a consultant employed by the Council to tell us about her reaction to being asked to attend the community hui. We wondered if she might have felt a similar sense of risk to that articulated by the Council. She explained to us that she was a 'people person'. She enjoyed meeting with the people who used the facilities she planned, but did not get many opportunities to do so. She liked being engaged in communities, but often found herself with only the time to undertake the technical aspects of planning. Without realising it, she had been the right person at the right time; another consultant might have responded with less enthusiasm to the invitation to attend a hui in Highbury. The Te Aroha Noa theory of change encourages deep questioning that tunes practitioners into the wide resources held in families and whānau. When we returned to the consultant to add depth to our story we learnt of the role that she had played behind the scenes by being responsive to the hui request. We learnt that, possibly without knowing it herself, and certainly without the knowledge of Te Aroha Noa, she had played a key role in facilitating the expansion of the consultation process which had had so many other ripple effects.

The Te Aroha Noa theory of change pays careful attention to relationships; they are an element that binds the theory together. At this level of our story, it was critical that Te Aroha Noa managed the relationships across the spectrum (community and residents, council and consultant) with care and sensitivity to ensure that everybody (including the Council) could safely participate in the process and that the risks were managed effectively. It was in everyone's interests that the process and resultant relationships were managed positively. It was not sufficient merely for any kind of community conversation to take place; it needed to be constructive and to provide for possibility thinking on different levels.

3.3.2 Layer 2 – the party in the park

From this small beginning where we responded to the opportunity presented by the Council to be involved in the re-construction of the playground, a larger set of ideas has grown. As a result of the discussions we held about the playground and the priority we put upon being as inclusive as possible,

approximately 30 groups - including the Palmerston North City Council, Housing New Zealand, the Highbury Police, Sports Manawatu, Public Health, local schools and kindergartens, culture groups, churches, community groups and residents, many of whom participated in the initial playground hui - worked together to create a 'Celebrate Highbury day' based on the opening of the Farnham Avenue Playground. We are getting to know each other, breaking down barriers and building trust as we plan this event together. We all have a passion to see Highbury recognised as a jewel in the crown, a taonga of Palmerston North City – a place with a rich cultural heritage and a place that nurtures the emergence of truly local leaders.

Celebrate Highbury (28-11-07) was the culmination of four months' planning to celebrate Highbury and the redevelopment of Farnham Park, Palmerston North. This celebration started out as an idea of a 'Party in the Park' between Bruce (Director of Te Aroha Noa) and Housing New Zealand in July 2007 following the revamp of Farnham Avenue Playground. Experience in Highbury is that personally contacting organisations to invite people to assist with organising an event will bring a strong and positive response. This approach ensures that the best mix of skills and abilities is included and that those who can't be part of the day will often provide some sponsorship to help. There is a strong community spirit in Highbury.

Along with community group representatives, more local people were gathered in to have a part to play. The event was about community and so no individual group was more important than another. This was shown in the way the meetings were run; they were open and encouraging. The chair of the meetings started the meetings off with ideas as a foundation for discussion, then opened up the floor encouraging others to put forward their ideas. Te Aroha Noa provided a base but they weren't the focus; it was the community. This way of running the meetings empowered participants to be involved in a way that wasn't overpowering but was inclusive. Those present at the large meetings were instrumental in the success of the day. Instead of sending faceless emails, the contact made face-to-face built friendships and trust. The building up of community through this event was supported by the

Council, which provided significant practical help, from the loan of a balloon pump to the provision of the large stage.

Groups each took on a specific responsibility for their part of the event. This gave people flexibility in how much time they would have to spend there on the day. For example, the early childhood educators focused on the early part of the day with the planting of the tree, entertainment for late morning and the food for all the pre-school children.

The celebration was officially opened by the Mayor, who also planted a tree with the help of a selection of children from local early childhood centres. Blessing the park was an important part of the opening; the local Kaumātua said that the park had never been blessed. Approximately 300 pre-schoolers were present to celebrate, with each pre-school involved performing an item or leading an activity with the other children.

In the early afternoon the local primary schools had the opportunity to perform in front of friends, whānau/family and residents. Cultural groups representing Pacific nations and New Zealand put on stunning performances; there was a sense of pride as whānau watched the performances and whispered praise to the surrounding people.

During the afternoon there was a gap in the programme. This was made into a spontaneous opportunity for people to volunteer to perform to win a spot prize. This gave children the opportunity to win admission tickets to the local swimming pool. One of the children gathered his friends and they sang on the stage a performance song they had learnt for a school concert. People took the opportunity to perform.

Celebrate Highbury was also an opportunity for groups to showcase what they do, in a relaxed informal manner. The Palmerston North City Library publicised the opening in February of the new branch library in Highbury. The Police had a relaxed presence around the park during the day, mingling with the local residents and having their photographs taken with the children.

The night before the Celebration a young woman came off the street and offered her family to provide some of the entertainment; they were fitted in where there was space during the day. In this way any

gaps that appeared in the programme could be filled; they also became a backup for some of the other performers throughout the afternoon. The microphone equipment they had on stage was also well used in the afternoon when the equipment available didn't work. Flexibility was evident throughout the day.

The Krumping Group performed not only early in the afternoon but also later with some of the younger boys they are training and mentoring. This group is not only about entertainment but also about encouraging self-discipline and personal development. The children showed the audience what they could do. Music is a way that everyone can become involved, from the pre-schooler banging on a drum to the whānau and families singing and dancing in a professional manner. It is involvement that is important in getting the community to come together.

The Māori Health Trust used the opportunity to promote its Smoke Free, Sun Smart and Outdoor Injury Prevention messages. They participate in events around the city to promote healthy living and the reopening of Farnham Park gave them another opportunity to do this. The lunches given to the pre-schoolers were healthy and obviously welcomed by the children. One of the early childhood centres reported they hadn't realised so many of their children liked Vegemite sandwiches and now they were on the lunch menu on Fridays.

The atmosphere was relaxed and festive. The fluorescent orange safety fencing was upstaged with balloons on top of the waratahs which contributed to the party atmosphere of the day. The Council workers were at the park from 6.00 am setting up, and when they appeared to have finished their tasks they were asked to help put the balloons around the park. This involved the workers in a way that was unexpected. In the words of a Council representative, they were just doing their job. The clean up went well with the Council workers working till late to leave the park in a pristine condition.

The surprising moments during the day were the unplanned moments. The celebration was an opportunity for people to get involved in their community. One of the participants in the organising committee said he was hoping there would have been more residents involved in the

organising. However, from my point of view this was a start to building community. A number of people who represented the organisations are local residents who showed their passion for their community by helping to organise this community event which brought the cultures of the community together. The people involved in the organising are enthusiastic and passionate about the area, and they worked in the background during the day while the local residents and children were up front and visible during the celebration. This celebration event showcased the skills and talents of the local residents. The different cultural performances were an opportunity to share pride in their heritage and appreciate others. It was an opportunity to promote tolerance of difference and pride in the people who live in Highbury, making Highbury proud by respecting and encouraging the people who live here. The focus of the day was on Highbury; no one person or group was seen to be steering and ordering the day. If people can see that respect and encouragement is there for people to be proud of who they are, then maybe that creates a safe space for more to take their place in the community and become all that they can be.

Prior to the debrief meeting a morning tea was held to acknowledge and value the contributions made by all those involved in the planning and execution of the day. Each person's and organisation's work was commended at this morning tea. The Council representative was excited that the Council could be part of this community-building initiative in a support role. The community was doing what they could and the Council was contributing their knowledge and expertise. The Council representative hoped that the community building will continue with residents taking the initiative to organise other events. *Kathryn, Te Aroha Noa Research Assistant*

In addition to a refurbished park, then, the playground project provided impetus for an important community event. But, in keeping with the 'more' principle, this was more than a great community party. It provided a framework through which relationships could be forged across sectors in the wider community which had not existed so strongly before. This means that in the future, when a local authority, community organisation or government agency wants to have a conversation

with the people of Highbury, there is a forum from which this can be managed. Instead of having to approach people unannounced, there are ongoing positive conversations between these organisations within which such initiatives can be planned and managed. This initiative also seeded the vision of a yearly cultural festival in Highbury that might provide a focal point for celebrating healthy whānau, families and communities. Providing forums for community celebrations is an important part of community building and provides a counterpoint for the negative messages that Highbury is sometimes associated with. An initiative that had as its initial purpose a time-limited engagement over the refurbishment of the park has grown into ongoing conversations about community development and regeneration. The relationships which grow out of these conversations facilitate the emergence of other positive initiatives within and between organisations and with the community because of the infinite possibilities that are generated when people from diverse backgrounds come together to work on shared interests.

3.3.3 Layer 3 – the paradox of change

The third layer focuses our attention on the individual effects that can flow out of larger, community-based initiatives. We also include this story because it provides an opportunity to consider the way that the effects of changes that are predominantly perceived as positive at a community or group level can have effects at an individual level that may be challenging or result in losses for particular individuals. The Te Aroha Noa theory of change suggests that when chains of events are set in motion, we cannot always control or predict the outcome. At a theoretical level it can be interesting to track through such chain reactions to see the effect they have. In a practice context, these types of effects are more than theoretically interesting; they are effects to which we must be particularly sensitised. The values and principles of practice typically require that we exercise care to minimise potentially harmful effects on individuals. At Te Aroha Noa the theory of change is concerned with social justice. Issues of fairness are important benchmarks against which practice is judged, so this example provides us with a way of examining the extent to which the theory of change allows practitioners, and Te Aroha Noa as a whole, to work not only with complexity, but also with the unintended consequences of a change process. This

particular story was composed after an interview with Tania (pseudonym):

I am a mother and I have lived in Highbury near the playground for four years, so the changes were really important to me and my children. Before the changes we used the park every day to play touch and my children used the playground all the time. I am interested in making sure that my children are safe when they are playing away from me and so the redevelopment of the park was important to me. I attended the hui after staff from Te Aroha Noa invited me and I was pleased to be able to be involved in the discussions about fixing up the park. I liked being asked for my views and the hui was exciting to be part of. People had quite a lot to say at the hui and people listened to each other; everyone's views were important. Parents were particularly concerned about safety. Things like a fence around the park and a zebra crossing so the children could cross the road safely were high on the list. The Council did listen to what the residents had to say and did explain why they couldn't give us everything we wanted, which was mainly because of funding. The tree planting was an idea that was mentioned at the meeting. The Highbury community wanted to plant the trees and take ownership of the park, to prevent the vandalism occurring. My children went and helped with the planting in the park and got their hands dirty, they loved it and I was proud. I like Highbury and I like to see it safer for the kids and not worry about their safety.

In the end the equipment was going to be too big for my kids; it would not be safe for them to play on. So in the end it hasn't been something that has worked out for me and my kids. The consultation was important to me; it gave me the chance to be part of the decision-making process and people listened to me when I was concerned for the safety and needs of the children in the area. There are a large number of kids playing at the park; more older kids than there were before. There is a lot of under-sevens in the area that used to use the park but I don't see them so much now. The structure of the park is more for the older kids, especially the monkey bars which is now too high for the younger children to reach. Housing New Zealand got involved. When they came to inspect my house

Tom (pseudonym), the Inspector, asked if my children played at the park. When I told him that my children loved it at the park Tom asked me if I thought that a big gazebo would be a good idea for shade. Because Bruce (from Te Aroha Noa) had been involved in the playground I suggested that he contact Bruce to get some support for this. Tom had the funding but needed some further support and input. Bruce is passionate about making Highbury happen. I think there are still lots more things we can do to make the park a good place for the locals. A mural would be a way of reducing tagging by getting the children painting, and would make the park a little brighter, also hand prints along the concrete somewhere. *Tania, mother living near the Park*

Tania had her own story about the playground initiative. It provided important learning for her, and she had incorporated it into her own parable – her own narrative that became part of her journey. While the practical outcome was a playground her children could not at that point in time use, the process she was able to participate in drew her into relationships with new people and gave her new insights into old relationships. The playground initiative became part of her own story as it played a role in her own ongoing development. It influenced how she thought about herself, her children and the positive benefits that could be expected from becoming involved in community initiatives. They were not the characteristics we had anticipated. But the Te Aroha Noa theory of change orients us to an open stance. It recognises that possibilities we might not predict can emerge. Thinking from within a complexity framework we know that the flow-on effects from change in one part of a system will have unpredictable consequences in unpredictable places. We might have assumed that all parents living around the playground would have seen the new play equipment as meeting their children's needs, but complexity theory should attune us to the possibility that this might not always be the case.

From the mother's perspective, although the park did not meet her needs, she had been able to participate in a process that respected and listened to her. In the end, the relationships that had developed through this initiative were such that she was able to accept the process as respectful of her even though, for now, her children would not be able to use the equipment.

Change can be paradoxical and we will not always be able to predict the value or benefit particular people gain from specific changes; individuals bring their own unique perspective and positions to these processes and in the case of Tania, her particular journey was such that she was able to benefit from the wider initiative even if she did not directly benefit from the particular equipment.

3.3.4 Layer 4 – creating possibility from unpredictability

In this layer we return to the community level and consider the time immediately following the Party in the Park. In addition to being a ripple from the original playground initiative, we can see in this narrative the way that each ripple itself becomes a pebble creating its own concentric circles of influence and change. This part of the story alerts us to the rich and numerous possibilities that emerge from well-managed community initiatives; their potential effects are exponential because of their complexity and the numerous actors who become involved:

The weekend following Celebrate Highbury a clash of people occurred in Farnham Park. The local newspaper reported that the residents were reluctant to talk to the police. However, the local community policeman spoke of his experience during the celebration and subsequent dealings with the residents. The police have been working hard for a long time to build trust amongst the residents of Highbury; the Celebrate Highbury day helped this process. Celebrate Highbury provided a low-key opportunity for the police to mingle with the residents, have their photos taken with children, be seen in a much more informal manner and to be seen in a positive environment as people and not just as policemen. The negative perception the residents have of the police was changed significantly by the police being seen as people at Celebrate Highbury rather than only in their policing role. Following the violent outburst in Farnham Park, the door-to-door enquiries found children recognising the policemen and telling their parents. The residents were angry the violence occurred in the park and showed they were not willing to tolerate this behaviour. The residents were prepared to take a stand and co-operate with the police by supplying information. In the past this would not have been the case.

This story continues. This is a story of change, of people wanting to be part of this story of change, people changing attitudes and expectations of their community.

3.4 Story Two – integrated practice

Our second story begins in the Early Learning Centre. Internationally early learning centres have been identified as holding significant potential for stimulating or creating the potential for wider family/whānau and community change. In addition to providing a valued local resource for a community's children, early childhood educational programmes have been described as the “spine of the resource” in integrated community centres (Warren-Adamson, 2001, p 12). Early childhood services, particularly when they are co-located with other services, enable parents to seek support with particular concrete, nameable matters (such as time out or skill development) while they hold the pain and unnameable things back until a time when parents are sufficiently confident to share and address these matters. In this way early childhood services can provide a low-key, unthreatening way of entering an agency that provides time for relationships to be built, a sense of safety and trust to develop and for parents to observe the ways in which staff interact with children. In this process they gradually become confident that the centre's interactions are culturally and personally appropriate and responsive, and that this is a safe place to work on the challenges they may be facing.

This story illustrates the ways in which essence and kaupapa can underpin and infuse the orientations to practice in early learning settings. In this way it draws our attention to the potential that multidisciplinary teamwork has for helping vulnerable parents to make necessary changes. The story is told by Elizabeth, one of the Early Learning Centre staff, who reflects back upon her first engagement with a mother and her children after the first tentative steps towards change had begun:

I want to share my journey with one family in the Centre. Mum began attending the Centre earlier this year and at the end of the first term she became a Parent Educator. This is a system we have created where parents commit themselves to weekly training sessions and two mornings working in the Centre. One of these is paid and one is voluntary.

We have only been able to contribute to paying for one session over the last two years [for a discussion of the impact of changes in early childhood education funding see Munford, Sanders, Maden, & Maden, 2007]. This mother has three children; one is six years old and attends school. She brings her baby and her three-and-a-half-year-old son with her to the Centre. The three-and-a-half-year-old child also attends two sessions a week on his own. This little boy has blonde hair and blue eyes that gaze up at you seeking acceptance. This is the first year that he has attended any pre-school services. He is an angelic child until he wants something or things don't go his own way; a child who has difficulty getting others to understand what he is saying. He has learnt that the best way to get attention or what he wants is to scream. He is a little boy unable to cope with routines, particularly at mat times. Invariably, then, throughout the year we have managed his daily tantrums. These are quite frightening as he tends to thrash his head on the ground when he gets frustrated. Our angelic child turns into an uncontrollable monster.

Earlier in the year, the Plunket nurse assisted his Mum to seek support from Group Special Education, and assessments began. The school was also struggling with her six-year-old child and had suggested that his Mum take him to the doctor and seek a referral to the paediatrician. He was displaying all the characteristics of a child with ADD. In addition to this, the baby was not gaining weight and he was subsequently referred to the paediatric dietician. Over this time, Mum became more and more anxious, weary and tired as life went round in circles. The experts – teachers, dieticians, doctors – had seen all the problems and quickly given advice. Their analysis may have been correct, but because Mum didn't have a voice in these sessions she was unable to share her wisdom and knowledge, and she was also unable to bring questions and worries to these interactions. This meant that advice that was given did not have a good fit with the realities of her life and with her own wisdom.

One afternoon in July one of our staff rang Mum to see if she could come in to pick her little boy up as he had become very distraught and could not be supported into any activity. Mum came in and took

her boy home. Later that week Mum talked to me; she was wondering if maybe she should move her son to another early childhood centre as we didn't seem able to cope with him. We talked through this and she openly shared the difficulties she was having with her six-year-old son and how his behaviour was impacting upon her other children. The six-year-old son was very angry, particularly with her. She had not proceeded with the doctor's appointment suggested by the school because she had observed the effects of Ritalin on her brother, and she did not want this for her son.

We talked about the challenges she was facing, and I suggested to her that she might find she needed some support, and maybe a counsellor might be able to help her develop some strategies that would help with all of these challenges. She was very keen to pursue this path and we checked to see if one of the counsellors at the Centre could see her.

We also talked about strategies that we could develop in the Centre to support her son more effectively when he came to our sessions. We developed a plan that we shared with her son. This involved me making a commitment that I would tell Mum all the great things he did, his achievements and the activities he enjoyed. If he couldn't cope on certain days then we would get Mum to come and pick him up. Interestingly, this has not happened since this meeting, although I have said 'Is it time to go home?' and he has quickly snapped out of any negative behaviour.

During our third term we focused upon healthy eating, and as the Parent Educators and Educators began planning activities great discussions took place on what our children were eating. How did we get them to eat vegetables? What effects did snack foods have on the children's behaviour?

What impact did this have upon Mum and her sons? After the holidays Mum came in bright-eyed and happy. 'How are you?' I asked. 'Great!' she said. 'I have had lots of sleep. The boys have been better. See if you notice a difference.' I observed the little boy's behaviour over the next few days and there had been a dramatic change. I was curious. 'What have you done?' I asked. Mum proudly reported, 'I have taken all the sugar out of their diet and it has worked.'

Three months later I look back to see where we are at:

Mum has regularly attended counselling and confidently entered into this process with her six-year-old son. The baby is growing and walking everywhere, exploring all activities at the Centre, particularly the paint.

The middle child is now four years old and is able to interact positively with the other children, and he is beginning to explore a wider variety of activities. Just last week I observed an Educator patiently putting finger puppets on his little hand and together they were singing 'Five Little Monkeys'. How exciting that he can now verbally communicate and others can understand what he is saying! The big blue eyes still tell a story and often I feel a tug on my shirt and the angelic face looks up and a little voice says, 'You look after me?' Time for a cuddle.

Mum has taken control of her situation and a few weeks ago she took all three boys shopping for the first time; something she would not have done a few months ago. The four-year-old proudly showed us his new shoes and then told us, with Mum's help, that his brother didn't get shoes because he didn't listen.

Together we have walked this journey forming new relationships, supporting Mum's growing strength and confidence, empowering her to take the lead; and as a Parent Educator she is now influencing other mums to interact positively with their children.

In this story we can see many elements of the Te Aroha Noa theory of change. The Educator embeds her story in the careful relationship she built with the mother and the hope and confidence she had in the capacity of this mum to move forward. She elaborates a careful process of positioning herself to gently support the mum to find her own solutions. She didn't criticise her for not following the school's direction to seek medical help, but rather suggested strategies that might provide the mother with support to enable her to devise her own responses. She respected and worked with the mother's wisdom. In her discussion with the mother she sought to engage with both the mother's cognitive and emotional self. The plan for working with the son

attending the Early Learning Centre was collaborative; it involved all parties actively and this included the child himself. It was shared and transparent, and in this way provided opportunities for the child to enter into the process as an active partner with his mother and the staff at the Centre.

The Parent Educator model developed at Te Aroha Noa is itself a reflection of the theory of change in action. The Healthy Eating module in the third term illustrated clearly the value of drawing parents as equals into early childhood practice; it demonstrates a more concrete way. As a result, the Healthy Eating module more closely aligned to the daily experience of parents and children attending the Centre. Furthermore, the discussions required to prepare and plan for the module created their own ripple effects outside the Centre, leading to important changes for this family over the holidays. Learning inside the Centre was seamlessly transferred into the daily practices of this family at home, and this illustrates how more can work at an individual level. Reflecting the journeying dimension of the essence, the approach adopted by this Educator did not seek to move to an end-point. Rather, it recognised that the mother was engaged in an unfolding journey, and in learning herself about how to resolve the challenges she currently faced, she would develop skills and confidence to resolve challenges that, as a parent, she would inevitably face in the future.

Finally, in the conversations the Educator reports having with the mother after the school holidays, we can see the beginnings of the mother's crafting of her own positive story. "See if you notice a difference", she says to the Educator; and in this utterance she stakes her rightful claim to the changes she has authored with her children, and she also tunes the Educator into the sense of moving through time with hope that she has created for herself.

Having explored two case examples that illustrate the theory of change in action, we now consider the key conceptual components of the Te Aroha Noa theory of change. The theory has three elements: a kaupapa, an essence and a set of practice orientations. We discuss each of these in turn. The Te Aroha Noa theory is an integrated, relational theory of change, and so throughout the discussion we also highlight the ways in which each element interacts with and informs the other two.

4. THE THEORY IN DETAIL

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter we explore the Te Aroha Noa theory of change in detail. The discussion is divided into three primary sections, each of which considers a separate element of the theory (kaupapa, essence, skills). Each of these sections begins with an extended verbatim discussion transcribed from the research meetings Te Aroha Noa staff engaged in while developing the theory. The discussion which follows these excerpts explores the conceptual components of each element of the theory.

Rather than being a theory with separate distinct components, the Te Aroha Noa theory of change is interconnected and recursive. This means that different components find expression in all three elements of the theory. As Te Aroha Noa worked on building its theory of change, it identified a strong connection between this emerging theory and complexity thinking currently being developed in social work practice internationally (Hudson, 2000). Accordingly, the connections between the Te Aroha Noa theory of change and complexity theory are also addressed in this discussion.

In summary form, the theory of change looks like this:

Element	Component
Kaupapa (inflorescences)	Ako More Relationships
Essence (spiky nodes)	Journeying Cognitive Relational/emotional
Skills/practice orientations (stolons)	Paradoxes Parables/critical moment Perspective and position Process

4.2 The spinafex

Te Aroha Noa staff developed the metaphor of the spinafex to help illustrate the theory of change.

Cultural Notes: (spinafex sericues)

Spinafex is a stout perennial grass that thrives

in difficult environments and is particularly well-adapted to coastal New Zealand environments. It is well-adapted to the problems posed by unstable sand dunes. It is a tough coastal plant that can cope with salt spray, drought, extreme temperatures, strong winds and shifting sand. The plant puts out strong, creeping runners across sand dunes. It catches sand as it blows up from the beach. Although the sand partially buries the plant, the spinafex grows through it. It stabilises the dunes by holding the sand together. The plant has three inter-dependent parts:

- > spiky, leafy nodes that catch the sand as it blows up the beach, sometimes partially burying the plant.
- > nodes are linked together through a network of strong creeping runners or ‘stolons’ that spread across the dunes – this means that the plant is not just at the mercy of wind direction; by working beneath a turbulent surface it creates stability in its immediate environment.
- > ‘inflorescences’ – seed-heads that detach, travel large distances across the sand and colonise new spaces. (<http://archived.ccc.govt.nz/ourenvironment/16/spin.asp>; Beach Protection Authority, Queensland).

Te Aroha Noa has grown out of its local environment in the Highbury community. It has adapted and responded to the changing social, political and economic landscape of the area. It has drawn from the winds of change that have blown through the community and sent out shoots of new growth in response to them. Adapting, responding and integrating local social and cultural practices, norms and values have been important characteristics of the approach to change developed at Te Aroha Noa. In the same way that the work the spinafex does beneath the surface is critical to its stabilising, growth-enhancing capacities, so it is with Te Aroha Noa. Working with families and whānau on complex and challenging issues requires that practitioners be able to work with and tap into a deeper reality, not just respond to what is apparent on the surface.

Te Aroha Noa is a strong networker, and it understands that relational work behind the scenes, harnessing

the opportunities for change that already exist within families, whānau and the community, and engaging in strength-based conversations with or about families and whānau are critical in preparing the ground for change. The networking approach draws many people into the change process, and this provides rich opportunities for a wide community of support to be developed around a whānau or family as they embark on ambitious change journeys. The networking is not only with the whānau or family and its own social support systems; it also involves drawing out resources from the wider community, including organisations that may have a role to play or have the power to make key decisions that influence what is possible. The sub-surface networking characteristics create the potential for change that is far-reaching – change may be incremental and impact on the day-to-day lives of families and whānau, and it may also be transformative, creating wider and enduring change for families, whānau and the community. Working on change requires practitioners who can see potential where others may only see difficulty. The capacity to seize the teachable moment, to engage in possibility and hopeful thinking is critical. One clear area where Te Aroha Noa has developed its capacity to provoke possibility thinking is in its intentional use of events and externally-generated opportunities. This was illustrated in the preceding chapter.

Te Aroha Noa staff explain the significance of the spinafex as a metaphor for their theory of change:

The spinafex is a native New Zealand plant. This means that something about our processes are unique; they grow out of where we are here and now. There is a sense too that culture has to be reflected in how we work. That is culture in the biggest sense of the word. It reflects the sense that the best practice arises when practitioners are able to exercise freedom and creativity in how they do their work. We have learnt that we get the best from practice when practitioners have the freedom and are supported to develop. Try to keep controlling practice from the outside and we will only work to a shadow of our potential; practice has to be able to adapt and fit local contexts.

The theory needs to have something of the dynamism of this place. There is something intriguing about the spinafex. It has developed to

hold very unstable ground. You look at the sand dunes and see how dramatically they can change. The wind can move vast quantities of sand. It holds firm what is unstable. But then there is also this opposite paradoxical picture; most of us would have images of these things in the wind flying around at the beach so they spread, they are dynamic, they are vibrant. They are playful, the very opposite to that image of prickly stability. That captures some of the tensions of this work. Maybe the seeds in the middle need crisis to be revealed. In the meantime they stay intact as a community. However, something changes and the seeds are exposed. When they are blown, they can get stuck in a place where they won't germinate; something else needs to happen to get them moving again.

A lot of the families and whānau that we work with would appear on the surface to have limited resources. They don't even realise they have that capacity to grow and change and develop. So our practice is about taking hold of that seed in everything that we are doing. There are seeds for growth in the tiniest statement or situation. Sometimes all we have is that little seed to grasp hold of. But there is always more than one seed.

The spinafex embodies that notion of things coming in and going out. It catches and deepens the significance; it is interactive. It is not just an objective thing we do. There is much shaping who you are and how you then interact. You are in this constant fluid interaction, there is a sureness of who you are and you hold firm but at the same time you are also shaped.

The metaphor becomes how we work, what we are doing. It shows the process through a narrative. The spinafex gives us a way of telling a story about what we do, how we do it and why we do it that way. The very way it is written is a model of how we work. It is something that people can connect to. It is a symbol out of this place. This is who we are.

Everything is interconnected. We need one to help us with the other. If we think about it, that is the core in there (the essence), and we have got these things (seed-heads) reaching out. But there is space in between for all this other stuff to occur as well. And there are seeds to grow and take root in new places. Often people present the prickly spikes

out at the edges. They are protecting themselves. They present as if that is all that they are. Sometimes you have got to find your way through, past all the protective barriers to the core of who somebody is. So we have got this essence going here. And then around the outside of that we put reflection and analysis that surrounds the whole. You can do it that way or we can put some arrows in and out from the essence. That was like people reaching out from their essence, and the arrows go back in because when the reflection comes it changes their essence, or has the potential to do that. That is where we got the spinafex from. *Te Aroha Noa staff explaining the significance of the spinafex metaphor to the researchers*

Te Aroha Noa practitioners developed the spinafex metaphor to provide a framework for explaining their model of practice and their theory of change. In doing this they intentionally sought to create opportunities to use language in particular ways. This allowed them to highlight the profound importance of relationships in shaping the emotional spaces within which families and whānau work on their change journeys when they come to Te Aroha Noa.

The spinafex metaphor denoted the significance of grounding work in real day-to-day struggles while at the same time recognising that small steps have large potential (Munford, Sanders, & Maden, 2006). There is a multiplication effect (more) from single actions and interactions; one seed-head contains many seeds. The seed-head also represents Te Aroha Noa's multiple and layered services. There are many different routes by which people come to the organisation, and once connected, there are many ways in which they can receive and give support. Families and whānau have many choices in terms of the ways in which they engage with and seek support through the organisation. It also means that they have many and varied options for contributing to the growth of the organisation and its community. For instance, parents who enter the organisation when they bring their children to the early learning centre can relatively quickly develop other roles such as Parent Educators (see, for example, Munford et al, 2007). This layering gives people the opportunity to experiment with new identities in safety and to practise for change in a supportive context.

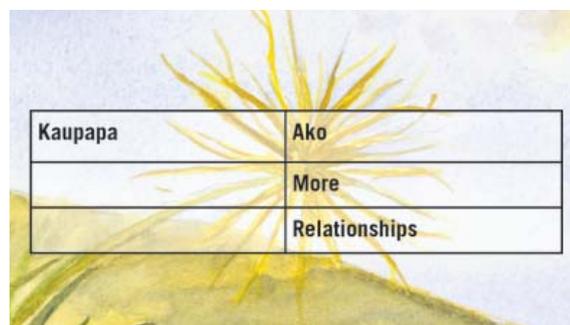
The idea of a plant with mutually interdependent parts also reflected the interconnected nature of Te Aroha Noa's practice and the way in which the essence

infused all aspects of this work. Mutuality has been an enduring and central principle of the agency's work. This principle "recognises the social and ecological interdependence of diverse living beings... [and] points to the purpose of connecting people... Mutuality encourages a value and quality of respect and solidarity" (Reeler, (nd), p 18). Staff understand the connection between the personal worlds of clients and wider systems.

There were strong parallels between the way in which the spinafex plant can effectively stabilise unstable environments, fit into a local context that initially appeared to be impenetrable and hold transformative potential. The three essential parts of the plant (inflorescences, spiky nodes and stolons) have parallels with the way Te Aroha Noa staff think about their work of supporting vulnerable and fragile families and whānau to create their own strong, stable environments in which they could grow and thrive.

4.3 Kaupapa (the inflorescences)

4.3.1 Introduction



The kaupapa threads into the other two aspects of our model. They are all deeply connected to each other. There is an interactive process between them; they are not separate. We would never be able to start with our kaupapa or philosophy. We would probably end up there. It is a product of the skills and the essence; it emerges out of these. It comes during the process somehow.

The whole that we are talking about is underpinned by reflective practice and analysis of what we are doing. It is a continual process of how can we do it better; always looking at the bigger picture; always saying if we do this piece here, how is that going to affect the bigger picture of where we see this person going? What vision has the whānau/

family got; is this little move we make here going to be part of that bigger picture? So it is always that reflection. Reflecting on our process, always using the strengths-based model but keeping in mind the ‘spikes’ – the things that can disrupt. People present very prickly situations, actually quite distressing, very distressing situations. So we have to be very sensitive and mindful of those situations and never downplay them, to very much hear them. But even as we do hear them we need to be able to hear through them to say, ‘some of what you are telling me, you are using some very good skills here’ and to keep those in mind while we hear the chaos.

Strengths-based approach is not purely just going in and looking for the strengths; it is hearing and honouring the people, that they are worthwhile as a person. We want to hear about your struggles, we want to hear all of that. And also to hear the other thread that is coming through. Deep listening, listening for more than what is there is important. Through this you see the possibilities; deep listening creates the potential for possibility thinking.

Te Aroha Noa staff explaining the kaupapa to the researchers

While this discussion begins with the kaupapa, it is important to understand that the kaupapa emerges out of practice and experience. The kaupapa is organic and growing; it adapts over time as the world around Te Aroha Noa changes and as the people who come into contact with Te Aroha Noa themselves grow and adapt. The kaupapa infuses practices and in an intentional way shapes the language, interaction and relationships of the people who work at the Centre. The kaupapa recognises that change is complex. At any one time several concepts and perspectives will have meaning for the worker and whānau or family. The skilled worker can work with these multiple perspectives, meanings and experiences in order to harness the possibilities for change.

4.3.2 Ako

All people are simultaneously teachers and learners. ‘Ako’ gives prominence to the idea that learning, growth and change are inherent human capacities. There is a natural energy and movement towards growth and change in all people; it can be buried, but it can also be uncovered. Unleashing this and harnessing it is, philosophically speaking, the central focus of the Te Aroha Noa project. Holding ako in the

centre of our thinking, we can see that the spinafex seed-head is generated from the node, but it quickly becomes detached and can move on, shaping other places as it goes. It is both created by and the creator of stabilised spaces. ‘Ako’ encourages multiple roles, deep questioning and a focus on the whole as well as the parts. ‘Ako’ provides a vehicle for families and whānau to enter into the work of Te Aroha Noa as equals with major contributions to make to their own growth journeys and also to the growth journey of Te Aroha Noa itself. ‘Ako’ also provides a way of drawing children into family and whānau processes (as we saw in Story Two) because it reminds adults that everyone is the holder of important knowledge about how things are and how they may be able to change.

The ‘ako’ principle has synergy with the strengths-based approach (Munford & Sanders, 1999; Saleebey, 2006) because it equalises relationships between people, resisting the reduction of the helping relationship to a one-way process where experts help passive clients to become complete. It underscores that clients are reflexive too (O’Neil, 2003; Rennie, 1992); they are active participants in support processes, not merely passive recipients. ‘Ako’ brings humility to supportive encounters, because it recognises that everyone has the capacity to impart new knowledge and understanding, and that in helping others to grow and change, practitioners themselves grow and develop too. ‘Ako’ is a critical dimension of Māori pedagogy (Pihama, Smith, Taki, & Lee, 2004, p 16):

According to Pere ‘Traditional Māori learning rested on the principle that every person is a learner from the time they are born (if not before) to the time they die’ (1994:54). Everyone was in a constant state of learning and therefore teaching because as well as the individual, the collective benefited through the transmission of knowledge (Nepe, 1991).

4.3.3 More

The seed-heads (inflorescences) allow the spinafex to be more than a plant that stabilises the immediate vicinity. At Te Aroha Noa, the idea of ‘more’ – adding value in an exponential way as a result of its presence – drives and shapes the organisation. Because the seed-heads can travel significant distances, the spinafex has the potential to transform environments beyond its immediate environment and at a faster rate than if it had to rely on the stolons alone. As part of the

kaupapa, the principle of 'more' signifies the way in which Te Aroha Noa seeks to influence places, people and systems beyond the organisation and the Highbury community. It does this by modelling its preferred behaviours and values, and by intentionally creating opportunities for others to experience and then model its kaupapa. Te Aroha Noa does not have to directly participate in every event, experience or relationship which grows from its presence; creating the possibility through its presence for growth and change in other places is an intentional part of the Te Aroha Noa kaupapa.

This concept also relates to using information to its best effect by sharing it with others who can assist and support families and whānau, and ensuring that the most is made of every learning opportunity (Westley et al 2006, p 158). What is of importance here is helping families, whānau and community members to transfer knowledge and skills learnt in one setting to another so that over time confidence in finding solutions to supposedly intractable issues can be enhanced.

'More' is given expression in a variety of ways. In individual encounters it is seen in practitioners working to create opportunities for people to discover their own positive potential. At an organisational level it is seen in the emphasis placed upon creating events and seizing opportunities. Events have a dual purpose at Te Aroha Noa. They are typically about celebrating achievement or marking change, but they are also about unleashing potential. They are intentional moments orchestrated to allow local leaders to emerge and to create spaces where people can discover new talents and capacities, and when synergies can be created that generate new individual and community resources. Layered underneath the purpose or focus of the event are multiple possibilities for individual and community growth and change.

4.3.4 Relationships

The Te Aroha Noa kaupapa is fundamentally relational. Building on its central concern with families and whānau, Te Aroha Noa prioritises the creation of spaces where positive, sustaining and respectful relationships can be developed. Te Aroha Noa seeks to model in its own milieu the relational patterns of strong, healthy families and whānau. Workers know that relationships are central to understanding and engaging with the complex dynamic of change and innovation (Westley et al, 2006, p 21). The emphasis on building strong relationships appeared in all aspects of the Te Aroha

Noa operation – from the ways in which front office staff responded to new arrivals, through to the way in which individual practitioners engaged with parents and children. It included the way in which staff related to each other, reflected, for instance, in the openness to working in interdisciplinary ways and to being appreciative of the skills different practitioners brought to the Centre. It was also apparent in the ways in which staff worked on challenging situations. For instance, meetings with professionals from other organisations to find ways of moving forward with particular families or whānau could present challenges because of the different perspectives different organisations bring. Meeting planning, supervision and routine conversations among staff featured discussion about how to best create the space where respectful interaction could occur. Care over processes such as manaakitanga pōwhiri and other cultural practices that bring people together in safe ways during difficult times were some of the visible ways in which Te Aroha Noa undertook this relational work.

In Te Aroha Noa the power of group analysis – the ongoing, reflexive generation of new understanding – is a fundamental part of the kaupapa. This leads to questioning which aims to disturb taken for granted thinking and focuses attention on finding answers to key questions that are posed to parents and practitioners alike, such as "Who are you, really?"; "What do you believe in your core self?"; "Are the things you have done working?"; "How do you respond; what works if you respond in particular ways?" Critical reflection can be a challenge even in small teams that draw on a single disciplinary tradition. At Te Aroha Noa, critical reflection occurs in a multi-disciplinary context where delivering seamless practice to clients is a central concern. Families and whānau belong in the organisation as a whole; they are not clients of a particular service. Practitioners need to be willing and able to enter into a relational process to be critically reflexive. Staff identified that the collaborative nature of critical reflexivity practised at Te Aroha Noa created energy and gave momentum to work. It has been critical that the shared nature of this practice has been managed with care to provide a safe environment for practitioners to examine themselves and be open about the nature of their own journeys of development and growth, even when they are challenging and difficult. Critical reflexivity recognises that change processes are ongoing for everyone, and that change is a process that is never finished.

4.4 The essence (spiky nodes)

4.4.1 Introduction



There has to be something of a core essence. That is the bit that as I've looked at it, someone has always kept saying [in the research project], 'Have you got this?' We have been testing you, waiting for words that would indicate to us that you have got it. So we know we are then talking about the same thing. We called that the essence. That core sense of what we are doing. It has something of trust; that was key.

There were a lot of relational words, unless there is a sense of true lovingness, aroha – getting some of those deeper meanings of what lovingness would mean, then people don't change. Change needs that kind of infused essence. That doesn't mean going along with what people want. Sometimes that aroha might mean that you absolutely stand against what they are thinking as best for them. That essence might mean that you see beyond what they are even wanting. And you steadfastly stand for who they could become, without that being too prescriptive. It was capturing something of concern always for the other. That it isn't self-interest.

It is about hope; that was also a key word. We felt that struggle and grappling and wrestling with issues is a part of this essence. It is personally costly; it costs the very workers. It is not something objective; just working with another. When you become a relationship, this can really be very taxing. We are not just in an object relationship where we do things to people. We need to be in dialogue, and the essence alters the practices, the 'how' we go about our work. The processes of trying to get it right so it is reflecting what we want to say, not what others might want us to say. Because

you are in the relationship, it is costly to you as a practitioner and as a person.

Commitment to becoming more conscious, not just for us but for all whom we work with, so that consciousness will raise, perhaps on the basis that if I had my deepest belief I would say that God is all reality. So if only you could understand, if you could become conscious of all of reality, you would actually know God. So it has a spiritual connotation to deepening consciousness. I would say that is becoming whole and becoming more conscious of what human life is all about.

It is organic, it emerges, it changes; you are in constant dialogue with an emerging reality, and that reality tells you what the next step is. It is trying to get into that way of working. That is the process side of it. Taking the narrative into the process.

It is often paradoxical and there is a respect for chaos. We put all of that together, and there is a sense of intention, in terms of where we are going, in everything we do. There is a strength in that intentionality; it gives us determination, direction and purpose. *Te Aroha Noa staff explaining the kaupapa to the researchers*

Throughout this project we grappled with the challenge of putting on paper the essential elements that lay behind the work of the organisation. While at the end of the project we had reached a point where the kaupapa had emerged and the essence had been given expression, a major part of the research process was grappling with the indefinable nature of the essence that captured what it meant to be part of Te Aroha Noa. The opening sentence of the extract above shows this sense of concern by Te Aroha Noa practitioners – that in the research project we understood the significance of the essence, and did not reduce the theory of change to a prescription or a narrow formula. Often practitioners stated that it was not possible to put these things on paper; they argued that people needed to come to Te Aroha Noa to experience what it really meant to do this work.

Seeking to distil the key ideas that underpinned the Te Aroha Noa approach to supporting whānau and families, practitioners returned repeatedly to the notion of an essence that united their work. Initially these ideas seemed to be part of the kaupapa, but as practitioners worked with increasing intensity upon

elaborating upon the philosophy, they came to realise that there was another set of characteristics embedded in their work that did not belong in the kaupapa – a set of characteristics that sat alongside and informed both the kaupapa and the skills. The essence is relational; it places practitioners in relationship with families and whānau. It was seen as an integrated place where who they were, who whānau and families were and the ways in which they engaged blended together. One practitioner suggested that:

In the essence we become our skills, they stop being things we do and become who we are, we stop rehearsing the philosophy and become it. It is the space where the opportunity to become the person you want to be is provided.

They returned again and again to a set of hard-to-identify characteristics that brought together their kaupapa and the key skills that shaped their work at all levels. In many ways, this was the most difficult part of the project – struggling to draw out the shared set of characteristics that always seemed to be just out of reach. At one of the last group sessions, one practitioner exclaimed with passion when responding to the researchers' list of features, "But you are missing the essence!" From this frustration we began the journey to try to describe this inner core that guided practice.

Thinking about the spinafex, it seemed that this essence was embodied in the spiky nodes that are connected to the stolons and which generate the inflorescences (the seed-heads). The nodes are paradoxical; they look unimpressive and even unwelcoming; they are prickly, and easy to overlook. They can even get buried by the sand blown up the beach. However, they are central to the success of the plant's capacity to stabilise unstable places, and they also connect the stolons together. The nodes can be prickly to the touch, but they have life-sustaining properties in arid places, and the prickly exterior protects the nurturing interior which produces the seed-heads. It appeared that the nodes reflected the essence, containing both the internally and externally focused properties of the organisation.

The spaces between the spikes are as critical as the spikes themselves. This reminds us that we need to look at the whole as well as the parts, and to recognise that what we can see is only ever part of the picture. These spaces convey the qualities of Te Aroha Noa

and the culture of care it creates for the families and whānau that spend time there. Without these spaces the plant would not be able to trap sand, which is critical to its stabilising qualities. The culture of care is a critical aspect of community centre practice that allows centres to create change-ful environments (Lightburn & Warren-Adamson, 2006).

This way of thinking about the nodes seemed to resonate with the ways in which Te Aroha Noa practitioners thought about and referred to the essence of the work – those dimensions that were hardest to pin down with words. There was a synergy between the kaupapa and the essence, and both infused the skills. The essence was the core of the theory of change. The essence informed both the kaupapa and the skills. The essence includes relational/emotional and cognitive dimensions, and it embodies a sense of movement over time (journeying).

4.4.2 Journeying

Te Aroha Noa practice has the character of embarking on a journey. In terms of the essence, this lends an organic and emergent character to the work. The journey cannot be fully planned in advance; it is not a mechanistic exercise of simply starting at one point and moving to another in a series of easily identifiable steps. It fits in and around the ebb and flow of the lives of the people who are part of Te Aroha Noa. Cultural processes and practices are one important way for the essence to gain a visible presence; they provide markers for the journey. They contribute to the sense of safety, belonging, welcome and attachment that is part of the culture of care, and they communicate to families and whānau a deep sense of respect for their own traditions and values. By engaging in these practices together and learning from each other, Te Aroha Noa becomes a place to which everyone gains a strong sense of attachment. These practices provide predictable and easily understood ways of dealing with difficult, challenging and sometimes dangerous situations.

Te Aroha Noa practice starts where the whānau or family is and moves carefully out from this beginning, which forms an ongoing reference point for practice. An emergent, organic essence is important because whānau and family change journeys are rarely linear or predictable. Working on change has to be integrated into the wider social and cultural milieu. Being comfortable with unpredictability is important,

and organisations such as Te Aroha Noa have to be able to accept the paradoxical and uncertain nature of change as a fundamental characteristic of the journey they share. The paradoxical nature of change is also apparent in the way in which perception and feelings are considered as important as knowledge and facts. Flexibility, adaptability and being able to take time are integral dimensions of the essence. Returning to the spinafex, practitioners observed that the spaces between the spikes were as important as the spikes themselves. They talked of being involved in a constant dialogue with the emergent nature of the change journey, and this evolving reality guided the development of the support.

4.4.3 Cognitive

The essence also has a cognitive dimension. It seeks to engage not only with the emotional and relational dimensions of support, but also with the thinking person. This aspect of the essence has a praxis character, and recognises that clients are reflexive (Rennie, 1992) and have capacities to actively engage with practitioners in the intervention as a process. Critical reflection (by practitioners on their practice) on the way in which the organisation functions within its community, and by parents in their journeys, is a fundamental part of the essence. Supporting individuals to work through very difficult and painful issues requires clearly articulated processes that are intentionally and carefully managed by practitioners. Reflective practice (through supervision, in team meetings and also in daily encounters between practitioners and whānau or families) encourages the ongoing development of these processes.

Seeking alternative viewpoints has a critical role in disrupting assumptions, challenging labels and thinking through new ways of approaching old troubles. As a cognitive process, reflection raises consciousness and encourages individuals to grapple with the unknown or the seemingly intractable until new solutions are found. It grows out of hope and optimism – the absolute belief that creative, positive change emerges out of intense engagement, not only with emotions, but with the thinking self (Kinney, Haapala, & Booth, 1991; Okamoto, 2001; Saleebey, 1997).

The cognitive dimensions of the essence reflect the commitment to becoming more conscious in all actions, and to convert this consciousness into intentional

interactions that create the possibility for parents and children to move to new spaces. Parents identify this aspect of Te Aroha Noa when they talk of adapting the skills-based knowledge they absorb at the Centre to their own interactions with their children, as we saw in Story Two. Learning as the foundation for growth and change is a critical dimension of the essence, and it has parallels with the developmental principle of *ako*, which is part of the kaupapa.

The cognitive aspect is also present in the Centre's community development programme. The commitment to action and reflection processes at all levels of the agency enables it to remain flexible, innovative and prepared to change its approach as new challenges emerge. It also means that the agency can take risks with new initiatives that are consistent with its essence. The combination of spontaneous and intentional, planned development is part of a process of "crafting strategy" (Westley et al, 2006, p 141) where agency workers seek and discover new opportunities that reflect the essence of the work, and which then allow it to respond more fully to the diverse needs of the families, whānau and community that surround it.

4.4.4 Relational/emotional

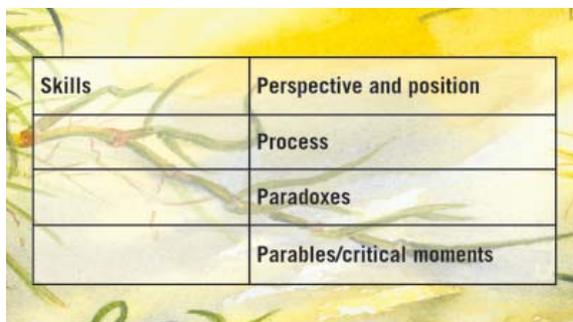
Relationships established between practitioners and clients are a fundamental part of the essence. Support comes packaged in the relationship, and the way in which practitioners approach this relationship is a critical factor in the effectiveness of the intervention (Munford & Sanders, 2006). Relationships are two-way, interactive processes where knowledge and learning are shared. Key dimensions of the worker/client interactive aspect of Te Aroha Noa's essence were welcoming, acceptance, aroha and valuing. Accepting, offering aroha and valuing bring deep personal obligations to walk alongside parents in an uncertain journey.

Practitioners talked about the relational and emotional dimensions the essence required of them as being personally costly; being available throughout this uncertain process required a deep personal commitment, and it drew on the personal as well as the professional self. Practitioners need to be willing and able to enter into a relational process and to be able to carefully develop this with families and whānau. The relationship provides energy, momentum and a safe context that sustains change.

The relational/emotional dimension of the essence manifested itself in many ways. It was experienced directly by whānau and families in the sense of welcome they talked about feeling when they walked through the doors of the Centre. Over time it was experienced as recognition of a deep connection between themselves and Te Aroha Noa. It was felt as a quiet recognition that the people at Te Aroha Noa held them in their minds; it would be noticed if they stopped coming to the Centre, and they were confident that someone would seek them out to make sure they were safe. Practitioners talked about the sense of welcome and hospitality as a sense of being able to create a safe space for whānau and families to learn to open themselves up to another person and to face their challenges. In this way the relational/emotional dimension of the essence was experienced as being in a shared journey. Holding this sense of a shared journey reminds practitioners of their own change stories and the difficulties they have encountered in their own change processes. This contributes a sense of shared humanity to encounters, and also brings humility and respect when engaging with other people who seek to create new and better spaces for themselves and their whānau or families. Understanding their own change journeys also reminds practitioners of the unfinished nature of change – that growing and changing is an ongoing human process, not something that only people who seek agency support encounter.

4.5 The skills – orientations to practice (stolons)

4.5.1 Introduction



Skills	Perspective and position
	Process
	Paradoxes
	Parables/critical moments

The skills are about how to look at somebody. The concern, learning how to spot what is happening, in terms of growth and possibility, and furthering that.

It is how you look. The lens you look at people and their issues through is really important. If you see their circumstances as a disaster that is all you will notice. But if you look at the skills that they have got going on in their life and how they can apply that to whatever has brought them into crisis, then you will interact quite differently. Quite often people have been in violence when they have been growing up; that is what they know. It is normal for them, but still it is not acceptable and so we need to draw that out in an honouring way, so we don't judge who they are. We might not like what they are doing, but that is not who the person is. We believe that there is more in that person. When whānau and families are going through chaos in their lives we can become the stabilising force.

Building on how you look, is learning how to interact. This is how we practice. Transparency is critical there as is being able to challenge in creative and positive ways, so people have somewhere new to move to. We often offer the challenge by modelling; we don't direct. Quite often families/whānau will hide things rather than be open about them. So when they do come to light it is about admiring that honesty, but also being transparent yourself and working through the process with them that encourages their transparency. That is about trust, building the relationship, building up the trust. Honesty is important, because often the families and whānau we work with have expended a lot of energy covering up things. Here we need to be able to be honest and know that we won't flinch from that; we need to be able to say how it is, what we see honestly and not collude. So we need a very safe environment here to allow these things to happen; information and knowledge are taken and respected. The tension is how to maintain a relationship and still do the hard stuff.

We don't apply preset formulas or procedures onto people. That is really important. Quite often in referrals we get from other agencies, we will be told what things need to happen for the whānau/family. And that is top-down stuff. Well, in fact, while we can guide some whānau/families, we cannot apply what we think needs to happen. They need to do that themselves. So it is about finding out what is going to work for them, and rather than applying it,

developing their skills so they can apply it for themselves.

Everyone has a desire for a better world. Most families/whānau will say “I don’t want what happened to me to happen to my children.” They do desire a better world. They want a different life than the one they are having. Otherwise they wouldn’t have come through our doors in the first place. We believe that that is the case for them. We build on that desire and keep reminding them of their desire and why they came here. That is the vision. Encouraging them to build the vision, which they may have lost, for themselves of how things can be.

The chaos and tension – these are the clues that people give you; they are resources and hold potential. Working with a family or whānau, helping them to make connections – maybe some of the chaos, the challenges their children present, are them trying to highlight how things are not going well for them. Maybe it is them trying to draw attention, a call for help. There is a tension there as well – either you try to fix the presenting problem, which you may think is only an indicator, or you try to fix the cause underlying, so you don’t fix the symptoms. And families and whānau give you clues as to what those underlying causes are. But they aren’t always overt with them, because if they were then they would see them for themselves and be able to do something about it.

It is important to notice all the clues that whānau/families give you to get you working in a different way with them. And you need to be able to take a lot of different perspectives, see them individually and collectively, see the whole and the parts. Thinking about combinations of factors and combinations of people and how they interact together. We need to be tuned into all of these, particularly relational dynamics. We go into the chaos rather than skirting around it. To do this we need to be able to deal with complexity and be brave enough to take that on. Chaos is your friend. Usually it is quite scary, but there is an element of saying let’s welcome chaos and complexity; they are opportunities to bring huge change.

That links to how to create the possibility for people to be transparent and open, that we are not frightened by chaos and complexity. It allows

surprising things to occur. It is something people know that we do here; there are links out there in the Highbury community with what happens in here. So people come here knowing that it is safe to bring all this complexity and chaos. They come with an expectation that you can do that here and it will be okay. It builds into risk-taking by families and whānau and the risk-taking that we take as well. When you have to talk to a family or whānau and tell them that you are going to sign an affidavit stating you believe that their children are at risk, you are taking a risk yourself with the relationship you have built up. But because the work that we do is transparent, we have told them that, we have to follow that through.

Stories – we take the time to find out who they are rather than forming a preset view. Often in the past they have been confronted with a statement like “These are the things that you are doing wrong.” So one of the things we do is ask the person referring the family/whānau and the parents to come to a meeting at the beginning where we ask what the purpose of the referral is, “What do you want for this family, what hope do you see for this whānau/family?” So it changes even how the person doing the referral presents the whānau/family, in front of the family or whānau. Because why are you referring them to us if there is no hope? They are in the room and the whānau/family get to hear some hope about them from this person who has referred them to us. And that is huge for families and whānau. I think just putting it into that perspective for families/whānau. That is our first encounter with the family/whānau. We change the way in which practice occurs from our first encounter by modelling how we want to work with families and whānau; from a base of respect and hope. You still have to address the hard stuff. You still have to address things in the home, but it is from the base of what everyone hopes will happen; it gives us a positive place to start, that things can become much better. And a lot of times it is the first time that the family/whānau has heard something that is hopeful about them.

The way in which you engage with families and whānau and with other organisations can absolutely change how the intervention develops and the outcomes that are possible. There is a lot of potential for change in questioning and raising

different ways of seeing things. That happens at all different levels, including the organisational level. Sometimes the questioning process does fundamentally shape what happens. It is amazing how much a question, whether it is at an organisational level over funding, or in a case conference, can shape how things happen. We place value on building networks and allies and openly sharing information. Those practices help; they are skill-based practices. We all can waver if we feel that we are on our own. By networking and supporting each other we strengthen our practice. There is power in sticking together and asking the questions in ways that protect people's dignity. So challenge is constructive not destructive. *Te Aroha Noa staff explaining the significance of the spinach metaphor to the researchers*

Discussions about social services skills often involve defining specific activities and tasks, and can break the intervention process up into discrete parts such as assessment, intervention, review and closure. This research project generated another view of skills. It suggested that a focus on taking a particular orientation to practice allowed us to examine methods for engaging successfully with families and whānau. Rather than documenting the many different skill sets of Te Aroha Noa practitioners, this section describes a way of thinking about and approaching whānau and families. It elaborates upon orientations to practice that allow different skills to come to the fore.

4.5.2 Perspective and position

Clarity around the perspective and position workers adopted as they worked with families and whānau was critical. In particular, they said that the strengths perspective underpinned the thinking that informed their day-to-day work. This orientation rests on the premise that everyone has a desire for a better world and that in most circumstances parents want to raise their children well. This provides a positive foundation for interventions. That said, the work of Te Aroha Noa needs to address difficult issues, struggles and challenges. Through open questioning, staff encourage whānau and families to approach their issues from different positions and perspectives, since this sparks possibility thinking. Practitioners explained that skills grew from learning to respect the many different lenses that can be applied to families and whānau.

Furthermore, being willing to question creates the space for the lens defining the family or whānau as unable to change to be marginalised in favour of the lens that sees possibility and the circumstances required to allow change to become reality.

This involves creative work with all the people and organisations that are involved in the life of the family or whānau. In particular, it often requires work on creating a shared vision with the statutory agencies involved so that they can become part of the audience of support rather than the 'controllers' who decide what the outcome for the whānau or family will be.

Being able to examine the source of taken-for-granted assumptions, judgements and labels that may have locked people into particular ways of reacting and relating is also important. Modelling different ways of responding to situations gently offers challenges to whānau and families to approach their struggles in new ways. This subtle approach to challenge has been a very productive way of un-sticking families and whānau. It provides ways out of complex or chaotic situations where solution-finding has been a persistent challenge. Working effectively with perspective and position requires workers who understand and work creatively with the differing agendas of all parties that become involved in the lives of families and whānau when they are struggling or facing challenges.

4.5.3 Process

In an organisation that delivers a range of social and educational services, the capacity to effectively manage dynamic, shifting and sometimes conflicting processes is a critical orientation for staff. Collaboration and networking are important at Te Aroha Noa. Over the past decade the organisation has intentionally developed its capacity to work in inclusive ways with the people who live in its neighbourhood. It has developed a model of parent engagement in management and decision-making within the organisation that has provided opportunities for parents to grow beyond being recipients of services to equal partners in the organisation's long term development (see, for example, Munford et al, 2007).

There is a tension between delivering predefined programmes in a more or less prescribed way and responding in creative and adaptable ways to the specific needs of individuals. Some of Te Aroha Noa's

services are predefined programmes, such as HIPPY. Others, such as the social and community work service, are flexible and respond individually. Still others, such as the Early Learning Centre, lie somewhere in the middle. They work within the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, but deliver this in ways that respond primarily to the needs and issues articulated by local whānau and families (Munford, et al, 2007). If we return to the spinafex, we realise that in biology the organisms that survive and thrive the best are those that adapt well to their local environment. So it is with support provided to parents and children in dynamic, changing contexts. The support that works the best is that which can adapt and respond to the realities of each whānau or family's circumstances.

Families and whānau often tell us that the factors they value the most about support work are the relationships (Munford & Sanders, 1999) and the synergies (Lightburn & Warren-Adamson, 2006) – the interpersonal dimensions that are particular to them, their worker and their circumstances. Social and community work requires adaptable and creative workers who can respond effectively to unfolding and unpredictable situations. It is this uncertain world of practice to which Te Aroha Noa and many other social service providers address themselves when they engage with people over change. Applying a prescription is unlikely to produce the ambitious changes that Te Aroha Noa seeks. There is no external 'cure'; whānau and families themselves create and sustain the change. The role of practitioners is to facilitate, or create the spaces within which they can achieve this. This is why the stolon represents the practice orientations of Te Aroha Noa so well. It is work done underneath, alongside and around whānau and families that helps to stabilise situations and create the possibility for them to create their own transformative change.

The other area where process is important is the ways in which the organisation and its practitioners conduct themselves in interactions with all external individuals and organisations. A repeated theme in the narratives collected as part of this project highlighted the power and significance of good process in achieving good outcomes. Good process draws on cultural knowledge and understandings about the most appropriate way of engaging with others, particularly when challenging or difficult matters need to be addressed. Respect for all others as well as respect for the integrity of

the local community featured in the narratives concerning process.

Te Aroha Noa often becomes involved in complex and contested situations concerning the safety and wellbeing of children. Frequently these situations have long and confusing histories, and teasing out cause and effect and the roles of different individuals at different points in time can be challenging. Having a strong process that guides people safely through these situations is critical to successful outcomes that leave people's mana intact so that they can move forward. Four key aspects were distilled from practitioner narratives concerning the development of respectful processes for resolving significant conflicts and tensions. These components reflect fundamental dimensions of the kaupapa and the essence:

- > Relationships – strategic, long-term development of relationships with key stakeholders who regularly intervene with children, families, whānau and people who live in the Highbury community. This allows for building the social capital of the agency, which enhances its capacity to effectively discover resolutions.
- > Respect – approaching all participants from a position of positive regard. This may involve separating people from their actions and their responsibilities (as public officials, for instance) and approaching them as people with the best interests of local children, and whānau and families at heart.
- > Containment (Ruch, 2004; Shuttleworth, 1991) – practices that make Te Aroha Noa a safe, non-violent place where people can bring powerful emotions and tensions and be assured that they will be safe and cared for. At Te Aroha Noa containment is managed through care and attention to protocol and process to actively manage times of high tension and conflict with safety. Practitioners also talked about needing to have the capacity and ability to respect and work with chaos and complexity (Kaplan, 2002; Reeler, n.d.; Westley et al, 2006). Being able to see chaos as a friend and an invitation or possibility for change, rather than indication of deficit, was important. This is demanding work which draws on the ability to blend and monitor the mixture of safety alongside the creative capacity to be innovative and take calculated risks. The location of Te Aroha Noa

within the community assisted greatly. Practitioners understood the struggles and challenges faced by the people who lived locally. They also understood the strengths of the community, its past successes and the resources and networks available. They could draw on this knowledge in their work.

- > Inclusion – inclusive practices are critical to successful processes. Resolving tensions, conflicts and concerns about the safety and care of children requires that practitioners can ensure that all interested parties are given an opportunity to be fairly heard, and also that they can ask difficult questions in safe, mana-enhancing ways. Inclusion is related to transparency and openness, which are critical aspects of establishing trust. This is the foundation upon which long-term sustainable change is built. Te Aroha Noa's integrated whānau and family meeting processes ensured that all those involved with an issue had an opportunity for their voice to be heard and to play a role in finding solutions.

Just as the sand dunes that the spinafex colonises are unstable, so often are the whānau and families that seek support from Te Aroha Noa. Staff need to be able to constructively work in dynamic environments that can change rapidly and appear chaotic. Rather than attempting to control this chaos, staff work with it to extract its generative, transformative potential. Stable environments can be easier to work with, but they also can be difficult to create change potential from. In this sense, the Te Aroha Noa theory of change embraces the uncertainty of chaos because it maximises opportunities for change.

4.5.4 Paradoxes

The capacity to constructively work with and balance contradictions is an important practice orientation required of Te Aroha Noa practitioners. Paradoxical work featured prominently in the practitioner narratives collected during the fieldwork. For instance, practitioners talked about working with emotion and logic (cognitive) together rather than treating these as separate domains of work. They talked about the importance of trusting their intuition and the practice wisdom they accumulated with experience (their own and the institutional wisdom of the organisation), but equally, of careful and detailed work that drew on their capacity to stand outside situations and adopt

an objective stance. Practitioners recounted situations where they worked in both a dispassionate and compassionate way, seeking to critically examine and reflect upon issues of parent and child safety at the same time as they worked hard to deeply understand the lived reality of the people they were supporting.

Risk also presented paradoxes for practitioners. On the one hand, they were often required to effectively assess the degree of risk parents and children faced and to act carefully to ensure any such risks were mitigated. On the other hand, they also recounted situations where their capacity to take risks had been critical to successful outcomes. Risk management by controlling situations was not a favoured response among practitioners; rather, they sought to balance risk as danger with risk as potential, and find a path through these two poles where the best outcomes could be achieved. Being able to balance these contradictory things in encounters with stressed and distressed people required that practitioners were able to invest themselves in the relationships they encountered.

The confidence and capacity to bring themselves (expressed by practitioners as the capacity 'to truly be themselves') into interactions with others was important. This required practitioners to work on their own development as well as support parents and children to grow and develop. Practitioners talked about their work as providing a stabilising force in the lives of families and whānau. In this they drew upon ideas developed in object relations theory, particularly around the role of caregivers in the healthy development of infants where the capacity of the parent to hold and contain powerful emotions has been identified (Lightburn & Warren-Adamson, 2006; Ruch, 2004; Shuttleworth, 1991).

Working with paradox, rather than attempting to create consistency, allows for possibility thinking. Paradoxes are inherently destabilising, and while this can bring challenges, it equally opens up spaces for new ideas to emerge. Possibility thinking is an approach that requires practitioners to constantly shift the interactional lens. Because it does not require agreement to move forward, it frees people from the need to work in a problem-identification/problem-resolution framework. Possibility thinking is collaborative and generates numerous opportunities for innovative responses to be found for intractable problems; it encourages creativity and collaboration in solution-finding.

The commitment to finding space to engage in critical reflection on their practice enabled practitioners to work on their development and to gain feedback from others about their practice. This was strongly linked to the concepts of 'ako' and 'more'. Practice provided opportunities for families, whānau and practitioners to learn together and address immediate issues, with the potential to create transformative change. Assisting families and whānau to discover their own positive potential often led to their becoming involved in activities that they would never previously have contemplated. Through their work on change they were able to gain the confidence and capacity to engage in new thinking about what was possible in the future.

4.5.5 Parables/critical moments

Narrative methodologies have an established place in both social intervention and research practice. Throughout this project, story-telling has repeatedly been highlighted as a critical part of the theory of change. Te Aroha Noa intentionally adopts a narrative approach to its practice, and during the fieldwork we became interested in explaining the role that stories and story-telling played in the theory of change. Parables, as a particular type of narrative, remind us that narratives highlight lessons learnt as well as ways of resolving moral and ethical dilemmas. Spirituality is woven into the practice of Te Aroha Noa, and for this reason the notion of thinking of narratives as parables seemed appropriate (narratives in this sense can also be thought of as critical moments). Practitioners talked of working within a broad spiritual consciousness that shaped the way in which they engaged with people. Story-telling features prominently in the daily practice of Te Aroha Noa. Narrative provides the vehicle for the development of the organisation's own unique parables. These are stories of learning, growth, development and change. The Te Aroha Noa parables are intentionally crafted and recounted as part of its critical reflexive practices; they are not random stories.

At Te Aroha Noa stories develop out of observation and experience; they have a grounded presence in the daily activities of the organisation. Critical reflective practice provides the opportunities for experiences to be crafted into change stories. They begin as practitioners' reflections on events or encounters. In recounting the stories, practitioners are able to stand outside their experiences and, along with colleagues, reflect upon them. The parables are multi-layered, and in addition to their concrete grounding in actual experience, they develop a learning component – reflection on how the experiences change or reinforce how practitioners work. Over time they also develop a structural dimension. They carry wider lessons about the culture of Te Aroha Noa and how it undertakes its work. In the telling of the parables practitioners develop their capacity to grapple with the unknown. Parables also have a performative dimension; through the rehearsing of the event or experience, they allow practitioners and families and whānau who are part of Te Aroha Noa to create and then recreate what it means to be part of the Centre. In this sense they constitute an ongoing active oral history that is continually recreated through the regular sharing of the stories. It reinforces the key values, principles and practices of Te Aroha Noa – the kaupapa, the essence and the skills (orientation to practice).

In this chapter we have explored in detail the Te Aroha Noa theory of change. We have considered the three central elements of the theory and examined the key components that comprise each element. The next chapter provides a framework that can be used by organisations to develop their own unique theories of change. It is based on the reflection process used at Te Aroha Noa and includes a series of reflective questions that can be used to structure discussions about the role of practice in family and whānau change. It is not intended as a recipe to be followed slavishly, but rather as a framework that organisations can adapt and develop in their own ways.

5. AN APPROACH TO BUILDING A THEORY OF CHANGE

5.1 Introduction

As part of this project, we have developed a set of guided questions that provide focus and structure for a process of theory of change generation. They can be adapted and used in other organisations that wish to generate their own theory of change to shape and develop their practice. In this project, these questions were answered using narrative, and this meant that each question generated several stories from which working concepts were elaborated. In other organisations that use different techniques to shape their work this may not be appropriate.

While we were fortunate to be able to work on this project as part of a Families Commission Innovative Practice grant, it would be possible to use these questions as part of ongoing reflective organisational practices, and over time to build a unique, sensitised theory of change.

5.2 Reflection questions

1. Who are the people we serve and how do we do this?

This first question requires understanding of the characteristics of the population the service seeks to support. It includes understanding the contexts and community settings in which these population groups are located. It requires reflection on the types of practice which these characteristics call for from practitioners. As the first question, it focuses practitioners outwards to their client group, and later questions can be framed in relation to this detailed understanding of the people who are the focus of the work.

2. What values, principles, knowledge and skills do we use to do this work?

Values and principles are critical dimensions of practice. They reflect in some ways the nature of the client group, and for this reason, this is the second question to be asked. Values and principles set the framework for practice. Practitioners may

not always agree on values and principles, and they may also question the extent to which the publicly articulated values and principles reflect the way in which they practice in reality. These discussions are critical, and it may take some time to come to a shared view of values and principles. This work is important, and practitioners should take time to ensure that they have in fact reached a shared point that provides a foundation for work with families, whānau and communities. Knowledge and skills are connected to values and principles, in the sense that values and principles will determine what knowledge and skills will be relevant for particular practice settings. As with values and principles, these can be contested and can be subject to much discussion about which knowledge and skills will be adopted and under what circumstances. Reflexive and responsive organisations can continually critique their knowledge and skills and their relevance for emerging practice challenges.

3. What difference do we want to make with these people and how do we think that we can best contribute to this?

This is a critical question, and calls for discussion that moves beyond superficial statements of intent. In exploring this question, practitioners will draw on their understanding of particular changes they have observed in specific cases. Discussion will also require that they link this understanding to the work they have undertaken with clients and the way that other factors have influenced client change stories. It requires that practitioners draw out their understanding of the realities of clients in context and come to a realistic set of statements concerning the role they see for themselves in client change journeys. In the case of Te Aroha Noa, the question asked was “What difference do we want to make in collaboration with these people, and how do we think that we can best achieve this?” This reframed question grew out of reflections in question two, which drew attention to the centrality of partnership in the Te Aroha Noa theory of change. In this way it can be seen that even the process of exploring the questions themselves leads to a deeper understanding of an individual organisation’s theory, and provides opportunities for critical reflection on the kaupapa and the resulting approach to work with families and whānau.

4. How do we know when we have been successful and when we haven't?

It may be difficult for practitioners to answer this question. Often interventions end before key change points are achieved because service delivery pressures require practitioners to move on to new cases. Also, sometimes clients are ready to leave a service before they have achieved goals they may have set. The focus of the work in these situations is on supporting clients to move to a point where they can begin to embark upon bigger changes. Another important aspect of this question is the focus on those situations where practice has not been effective. Seeking disconfirming examples of practice is just as important as seeking confirming examples, because it can help to establish where the boundaries of practice lie. Answering this question may require that practitioners undertake some investigations with past clients to explore how their work was experienced, and the types of impacts that this may have had on a longer timescale than an intervention typically allows. It is an important question, and practitioners may need to allocate some time to planning how they will gather the information that will allow them to examine it carefully and then have time to undertake this work.

These four key questions can be used to structure ongoing reflective sessions to create a shared story elaborating upon an individual organisation's theory of change. They are intended to provide focus for a fairly intensive period of reflection that can be built into the practice of agencies by allowing time to reflect, at regular intervals, on practice. These meetings can form part of an integrated approach to client work by including practitioners from all service areas, which allows for ideas to be shared across contexts and settings so that interventions with clients can be more effectively targeted and focused on clients' needs. In developing their own theory of change, organisations can also include in their analysis a consideration of the ways in which each reflective session develops. In the Te Aroha Noa case, for instance, we discovered the significance of story-telling, and of rehearsing the story of Te Aroha Noa and the way in which people who are part of the Te Aroha Noa story develop their own unique parables to reflect and reinforce key dimensions of the theory of change. Both the content of the sessions and the way in which they are structured contain important data that can be used in the theory construction process.

6. CONCLUSION

This project had two objectives: to generate a theory of change that explained the approach to practice taken at Te Aroha Noa; and to elaborate upon an approach that could be used by other similar organisations to articulate their own theory of change. The project was part of an international effort focused on advancing understanding of the role of community-based support services in family change (see, for example, Berry, 2007; Lightburn & Warren-Adamson, 2006; Munford et al, 2006; Palacio-Quintin, 2006; Warren-Adamson, 2006; Zeira, 2006). Theories of change provide organisations with the opportunity to articulate the way in which they understand their role in and contribution to family change. They provide frameworks that allow consideration of diffuse aspects of practice as well as particular intervention techniques that create change-ful conditions. Theory of change processes provide practitioners with the opportunity to think widely about their work as they draw connections between this work and the other processes in the lives of families and whānau.

The Te Aroha Noa theory of change encourages us to think about change as a day-to-day journey involving the creative management of relationships and behaviours, rather than the achievement of a single point or fixed state that can be predefined and objectively measured. This sensitised view of change recognises that interventions or support involve the blending of a range of not always complementary agendas (Howe, 1987; Warren-Adamson & Lightburn, 2006). Understanding how to manage this dynamic mixture is a central concern of the theory of change. In this way, the day-to-day shared journey of families and whānau and practitioners is an ongoing process of learning, growth and development. This is primarily centred on what happens inside whānau and families. It is also concerned with the journeys of communities, and the practice and personal journeys of staff (Warren-Adamson & Lightburn, 2004, pp 219-220), their ability to remain creative and critically reflective about their work with families (Ruch, 2000) and the ways that they connect with other social systems.

The theory of change emphasises the gradual, accumulative nature of development and highlights the way that change is a shared creation of families and

whānau and practitioners. As it emerged through the research process, Te Aroha Noa theory of change had strong connections with complexity theory (Kaplan, 2002; Reeler, n.d.; Westley et al, 2006). Because the theory of change orients practitioners to change as a diverse process that takes place in many different ways, the work on change does not need to focus on discrete, single or presenting issues. Practitioners described their work as drawing on multiple levels and understandings of whānau and families and their contexts as they collaboratively worked to fashion the process of support; it was carefully tailored to the particularities of the whānau or family, bearing in mind also the wider philosophical approach (kaupapa) and practice orientations of the organisation. In this way, understanding change called for the capacity to understand the way in which the family or whānau stood in relation to their wider context. This included all their immediate relationships and interactions as well as their whakapapa and other histories. Particular practice skills that this drew out included the capacity to be sensitised to matters that are not apparent, and to ask expansive questions that provided opportunities for families and whānau to tell their stories in their own way. Then to build on these stories with potential-enhancing questions that suggested new ways of responding to old troubles. This was called possibility thinking.

The theory of change allows practitioners to respond on a range of levels, from the individual and intrapsychic to the systemic, in an integrated and holistic way. It provides a framework within which practice is able to move work beyond individualised, crisis-related and problem-saturated work (Warren-Adamson, 2001) to integrated, strengths-based work that has responsive and opportunistic characteristics.

The centrality of relationships in this endeavour was highlighted repeatedly. Reflective practice strategies that were hermeneutic and iterative rather than rational and linear (Ruch, 2000) characterised practitioners' thinking. The theory recognised the centrality of emotion and (cognitive) understanding in support, as well as in the troubles that bring whānau and families to Te Aroha Noa. The notion of the community centre providing containment and productively managing the emotional content of interactions while working to develop reflexive

understanding (Lightburn & Warren-Adamson, 2006; Mandin, 2007) helped us to understand the theory in action. Practitioners repeatedly referred to chaos and complexity characterising their work as well as the lives of many of the families and whānau with whom they worked. Rather than seeing these as inevitably negative characteristics, like chaos and complexity theory itself, these were seen as neutral and holding potential for change (Kaplan, 2002; Reeler, n.d.; Westley et al, 2006). Strong, functional relationships, well-managed processes and a commitment over time to being engaged in families and whānau were key strategies practitioners used to positively work with paradox. These were inherent qualities of the zone in which they worked. Respecting chaos and unpredictability did not signal an acceptance that ‘anything goes’; rather, it underscored a recognition that the systems with which Te Aroha Noa engaged had these characteristics and that they held potential for change if productively managed. In this sense, relationships, commitment over time (journey) and use of good processes were the methods used to manage the work on a daily basis.

Practitioners reported on the use of the element *ako*, an idea they had borrowed from *tangata whenua*, and an element developed in their own practice labelled ‘more’. These two elements had emerged from their practice, but also seemed to have strong synergies with key principles in complexity theory. ‘Ako’ gave a strong local connection to the reflexive dimensions of complexity theory’s feedback loops. Complexity theory emphasises the interactive nature of systems and highlights the interdependency of parts. In ‘ako’, the reflexive way in which people can be simultaneously teachers and learners reminds us that relationships are not simple and linear; families and whānau bring resources, competencies and expertise to the change journey, and these include (and extend beyond) being the most knowledgeable stakeholders in their own changes. They include resources that build and extend the capacity of organisations to do their work well, and resources and expertise that can be harnessed in local community contexts. ‘Ako’ requires practitioners to work with humility and to understand that they are only one part of the change formula.

More emerged out of an intense dialogue exploring why Te Aroha Noa placed a strong emphasis upon events, when the events seemed to demand such huge

resources from the individuals in the organisation. We realised that we needed to explore what else, beyond the event itself, practitioners saw in their events. We learnt that events were always seen as embodying potential for unpredictable but positive things to happen. Practitioners had learnt over time that events were catalysts on a broad front and that when time, energy, care and attention were invested in the creation of events, new possibilities emerged. Similarly, we realised that ‘more’ was a repeated theme in discussion about the situations practitioners recounted where families or whānau had appeared to be stuck, and where potential for movement was not easily apparent. The notion of possibility thinking grew from this exploration. Possibility thinking and ‘more’ connect together and provide a conceptual framework that allows practitioners to think beyond what is apparent on the surface, to ask deep questions and also to recognise the large ripple effects that can emerge from small stimuli.

At the end of the project we developed a set of guided questions that could be used by other organisations seeking to develop their own theory of change.

These questions were:

1. Who are the people we serve and how do we do this?
2. What values, principles, skills and knowledge do we use to do this work?
3. What difference do we want to make with these people and how do we think that we can best contribute to this?
4. How do we know when we have been successful and when we haven’t?

These questions could be used as part of critical reflection processes. Te Aroha Noa practitioners developed the *spinafex* metaphor to provide a framework for explaining their model of practice and their theory of change. They chose to use a story and a metaphor to structure their accounting for their work because this most closely reflected their approach to practice.

An important step in the process of theory development for Te Aroha Noa was to take the theory and apply it to concrete situations. This was done by analysing two different types of initiatives, one at the community level

(the playground) and one at the individual practice level (integrated practice). The remaining tasks for the Te Aroha Noa team involve continuing to document the ripple effects from its practice in order to deepen their understanding about the most effective ways of shaping family, whānau and community change initiatives. This learning is being applied in a community initiative to reduce domestic violence and in a range of adult

education programmes that develop skills in diverse fields, including computing and catering. The theory of change is a living theory; it will change over time as practice develops at Te Aroha Noa, and as the lives of the families and whānau in this community change. The process used in this research can be used again to document the way in which the theory has changed.

APPENDIX ONE: THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Collaborative design and appreciative inquiry method

The design of this research project was based on collaborative or co-operative inquiry (Munford & Sanders, 2003a, b; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

This is a participative, user-empowering approach to research which allows for a transformative relationship between researchers, practitioners and users. Our research was also influenced by the thinking embodied in appreciative inquiry and empowerment evaluation methods (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2004; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). This research approach was chosen because our goal was to develop findings that would be embedded in the local practice of Te Aroha Noa. The methodology was structured around a process of regular engagement between Te Aroha Noa practitioners and researchers from the Social Work Programme at Massey University. It drew on an appreciative inquiry process that Te Aroha Noa had already developed to guide its decision-making regarding practice and management. Appreciative inquiry has been used as a reflective organisational development tool in various fields. For instance, Bright et al (2006) reported on a four-stage process applied in the Office of Research and Development of the United States Environment Protection Agency. The four stages were described as: discover, dream, design and destiny. Appreciative inquiry is process-based, and involves the creation of safe spaces where people can critically and provocatively create new propositions and ideas (Hammond, 1998, p 52) in an ongoing, generative way.

Over two years, practitioners and researchers met together at Te Aroha Noa to inquire into the theory of change that lay beneath daily practice. It adopted the inquiry mobilisation process identified by Cooperrider and Whitney (2004) as central to appreciative inquiry that involves asking unconditional positive questions, and supplementing this with reflection before and after question-asking sessions to gain feedback on the developing model and to test particular dimensions in the work of Te Aroha Noa. These reflective sessions considered the different dimensions of practice at Te Aroha Noa and the way in which the organisation had developed and adapted over time. They moved from

the very general, which included reflections upon how the vision and values of the organisation were translated in practice, to the very particular, where instances of engagement with specific families and whānau were considered. In total, 17 focused group discussions were held over the two years of the project; they were preceded by and followed up with a series of individual reflections by each group participant.

Appreciative inquiry is intentionally a collaborative method for creating the conditions under which innovative solutions can be identified. Collaborative approaches have a key set of characteristics:

- > All participants have equal status and are recognised as bringing expertise critical to the successful completion of the project. It is recognised that inquiry members have different expertise and this diversity contributes to the depth and richness of the inquiry if equal weight is given to all expertise. The corollary to this is that all participants share responsibility for the outcome of the inquiry.
- > The method for inquiry is openly negotiated and agreed amongst participants in order to increase the capacity of the inquiry to draw from the widest possible sources of knowledge. This means that it can change over time as a result of discussion, reflection and negotiation.
- > Data and analysis are shared among all members, who create a shared agenda for investigation that is negotiated openly.

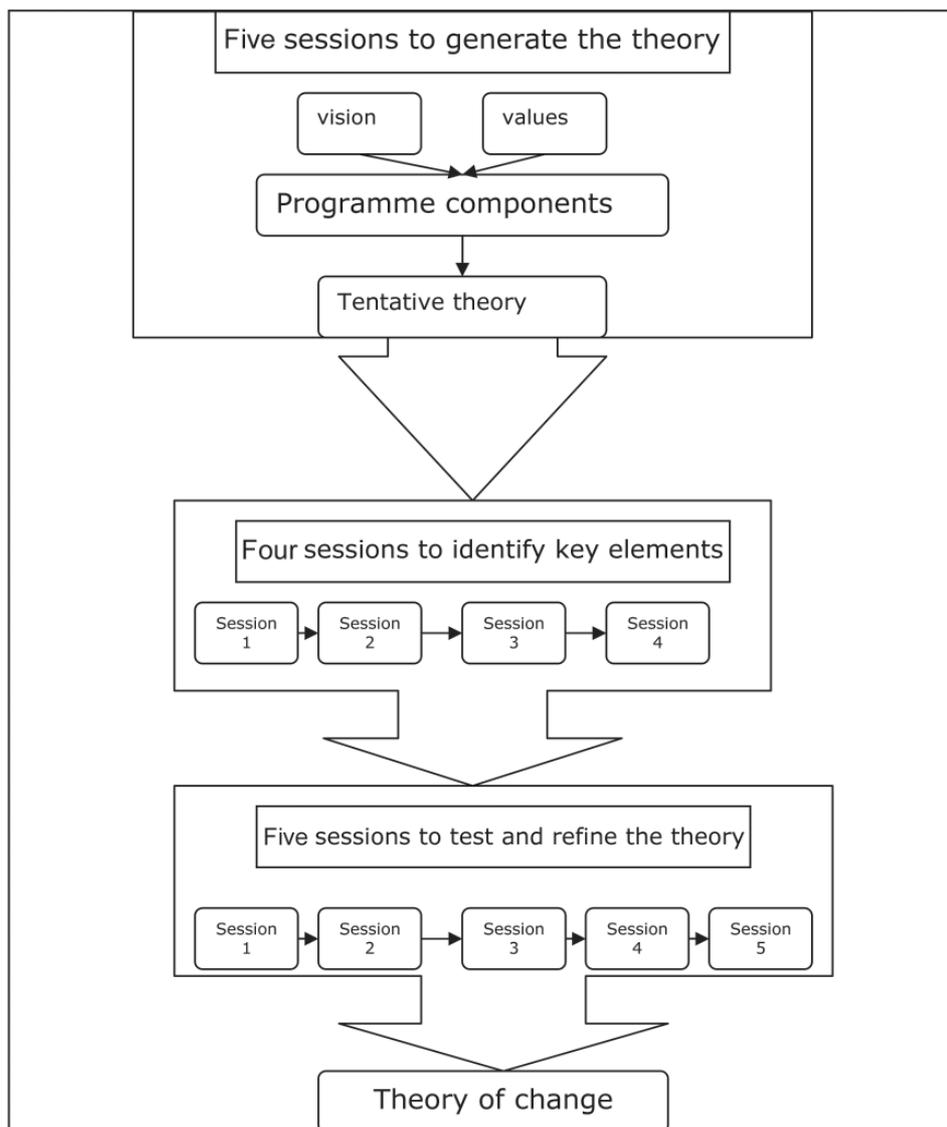
The project plan and research process

Collaborative inquiry does not typically proceed in a neat and predictable fashion. While there is a clear agreement about overall direction and a shared set of objectives, the negotiated and open nature of these investigations means that the design will have an emergent character. In this way, collaborative research shares characteristics with the approach to practice of organisations such as Te Aroha Noa; it needs to be able to adapt and respond to the realities of the situations it encounters in the field as information and understanding build. Collaborative inquiry research is also highly sensitive to the local context, and so changes in the setting can bring about changes in the design. At the beginning of the project we agreed upon an investigation strategy. In this preliminary meeting we also set ground rules for the meetings,

including keeping the group to its original membership, even if new people came to the organisation; that the issues discussed in the sessions would not be discussed outside; and that meeting notes would only be distributed to and shared among those people participating in the meetings. The first set of sessions was planned to examine in detail the vision and values of the organisation and its component programmes; to specify the way in which these higher-level sets of understanding were translated into practice in general terms; and the contribution these were thought to make to change, in general terms. Following this, we planned

to shift the focus of the reflections to identifying the way in which this preliminary theory translated into daily practice. Here the group would explore a series of individual cases, critical incidents (Gagne & Bouchard, 2004) and specific family or whānau outcomes (both those deemed to be 'successful' and 'unsuccessful') to define core elements of practice that were consistent with the theory of change. Finally, attention was expected to focus on identifying different types of impacts experienced by families and whānau who were engaged with Te Aroha Noa.

Our initial project plan looked like this:



However, the research did not follow this neat prescription, and in learning to adapt and respond to the unfolding of the research agenda, we built our understanding about how Te Aroha Noa worked in its own space. As a result, the neat programme plan we had outlined in the original meeting shifted and changed in response to the insights gained in each of the sessions. In the end we conducted more sessions than we had planned, and after session five we changed the focus as we recognised the importance of working with a narrative approach.

We commenced the research as planned with four vision and values reflections. At the first meeting we learnt that there was a strong synergy between these publicly articulated statements about Te Aroha Noa and the way in which practitioners approached their work in general terms. By the third session, discussion became quite stilted and communication did not flow as we had hoped it might. Practitioners often drew in questions and issues that did not seem to be clearly related to our tasks, and these diverted discussion away from what we had thought of as our key focus. After the fourth session we stopped to reflect on and analyse the material generated. The fifth session involved a review of our progress towards the research goals and a reflective discussion about both the process and content of sessions. We reflected that the plan as we had originally conceived, which suggested that we focus on searching for elaborative examples, might be restricting our capacity to move to a deeper level of discussion and analysis, so we began to look for a new way of structuring our encounters.

Gergen (1997) has underscored the centrality of story, metaphor, narrative, relational ways of knowing and language in structuring our understanding of our world. The process of telling a story, of change, of growth and learning, and recounting the journey to a high point carries vital organisational information that is often lost in the busy day-to-day work of a community organisation. Practitioners may record in their case notes an end point, or a time when they may have not been clear about how to proceed; they may identify a critical event, but typically they do not have the time to stand back and look at the story in its totality as a story of growth from which concepts or more general principles might be able to be abstracted. To be successful, this project needed to create opportunities for practitioners to recount many stories – those that

ended well, those where things did not end so well and those that contained surprises.

Analysis of the content and shape of the reflective conversation in session five suggested that we focus attention on creating an environment where practitioners could recount their own practice stories. The narrative method underpinned Te Aroha Noa's approach to practice, and it appeared in session five that narrative might also provide us with the vehicle to explore the deeper levels of practice we needed to discover in order to generate the Te Aroha Noa theory of change. Narrative has roots in social constructionism, and facilitates the development of understandings of situated realities and meanings.

Re-reading the field notes and listening repeatedly to the recordings of the reflective sessions, we recognised the power of narrative in shaping the way in which practitioners talked about their work within their community, and the significance of metaphor in extending capacity to think in new ways about the strengths and struggles of families and whānau. One clear pattern that emerged from our first-level analysis of research field data was the repeated use of narrative and metaphor to punctuate explanations of change, growth and development. Stories that were tied to specific events where staff had noticed having change-ful characteristics featured prominently in the field data we had gathered. These stories were repeated in subsequent research sessions, and when we enquired, staff told us that these stories were also used in the routine discursive processes of the agency to develop, reflect upon and manage practice. As a result of this, we began looking for exemplar stories and different metaphors that might be used to develop a rich elaboration of the Te Aroha Noa theory of change by encouraging the retelling of individual practitioners' stories.

The telling of stories then formed the structure for gathering a deeper level of data in this project. Sessions six to 10 were structured around one practitioner telling one or more stories delving into their own journey as part of Te Aroha Noa and being 'interrogated' by the other participants using appreciative inquiry's unconditional positive question technique. The sessions were digitally voice-recorded and summaries were extracted after each session. Each summary was given back to the practitioner to check, and to avoid

contamination of information between sessions, these individual summaries were not circulated to other members of the team until after the last practitioner session. Sessions were held at eight-weekly intervals, and this helped reduce the extent of the transfer of explanations and stories between sessions while still retaining the project in the front of practitioners' minds.

Reflective processes: Rehearsing the Te Aroha Noa

story – Narrative has been a fundamental part of the practice repertoire at Te Aroha Noa, and so the practitioners who participated in this project were highly skilled in these techniques and understood the potential that a well-managed story held for learning, growth and development. Through the sessions, practitioners demonstrated the way in which they used narrative to construct and maintain the oral history of Te Aroha Noa and the ways in which it intersected with the surrounding communities. The oral history of Te Aroha Noa links the public face of the organisation with the private lives of all the people who come through its doors. It connects the personal journeys of all individuals who experience Te Aroha Noa with the principles, values and philosophical underpinnings of the organisation, and it provides context and examples of the ways in which practice occurs. The reflective processes used by the practitioners enable the positive stories of change to be celebrated and the key elements reinforced so that others can learn from them. It became clear as the research progressed that the reflective component of practice was a central component of the theory of change within the agency, and that it contributed to the building of innovative and responsive practice.

The audio records show that sessions six to 10 became increasingly animated and engaged, and also traversed sometimes difficult and painful territory. Practitioners practised deep listening as each recounted the story of their own journey, and they also adopted reflexive, critical questioning as they asked each other to elaborate and analyse their stories. Building on the unconditional positive question technique, they identified the role of the 'critical friend' – the person who was trusted to ask deep questions, and the role that the listeners in each session would play. Thematically, the content of discussions in these sessions was similar to that which emerged in the first four sessions; this suggested a strong coherence between the public expression of how Te Aroha Noa

worked (manifest in the vision and values statements, for instance) with the individual practitioners' accounts. However, the depth was markedly different once we embarked on the process of exploring how and why practitioners came to Te Aroha Noa and how they experienced practice in the Centre, and we began to learn about the theory of change which underpinned the Centre.

In their narratives they elaborated an action-learning process by which the work of each practitioner was drawn into the growing corpus of knowledge about how to be a Te Aroha Noa practitioner who could contribute to the process of change creation within families and whānau, and who could draw upon this body of knowledge to grow and develop in turn. These narratives also had a structural dimension, in that they reinforced the shared practice wisdom about the daily application of the Te Aroha Noa theory of change. This theory of change is developmental and critically reflexive. The reflexive process used in this research reflected the reflexive processes used in centre practice. The narrative approach underpinned practice encounters with whānau and families and also structured supervision and practice development. These processes created an active oral history that was shared, created and recreated through stories that reinforced how Te Aroha Noa understood family and whānau change. These narratives contained the key values and principles that underpinned practice, and the skills and strategies practitioners used in encounters with parents and children. These reflexive processes are an organic and growing manifestation of the community where they take place.

After session 10, the researchers compiled the written records of all the meetings and returned them to practitioners for their reflection and discussion in session 11. These accounts clearly illustrated the strong connection between personal journeys of practitioners; the nature of the practice they had developed, in terms of how they engaged and worked with families and whānau; and the journey of the Centre as a growing, emergent entity. We gathered surface-level descriptions in sessions one to five that provided a general outline of the way in which Te Aroha Noa engaged with change in its relationships with local families and whānau. The detailed and sometimes painful discussions that took place in sessions six to 10 provided the data which allowed us to bring to the foreground the implicit theory

of change and to understand how this was applied in daily work. It appeared that we had to explore the deeply personal to understand the professional. Understanding how practice was configured required that we understand how the practitioners had come to work in the way that they did. It became clear through these semi-structured conversations that practice at Te Aroha Noa and the theory of change that underpinned it was something that was co-created by staff and local families and whānau; it grew and developed over time in response to the local context as well as the skills and expertise that practitioners and whānau and families brought to the Centre.

At this point we had developed quite a detailed sense of Te Aroha Noa's use of story and metaphor as important strategies that structured their work. They created opportunities for language and relationships to shape the emotional spaces within which families and whānau worked on their change projects. Analysing the change stories, metaphors and parables with practitioners gave us a grounded set of working concepts. These lent some shape to their work that made sense to them; they resonated with the literature and seemed to reflect the ways that whānau and families experienced centre work. Having learnt this, the researchers set the staff the challenge of taking the sets of working concepts and shaping them with either a story or a metaphor so that they could be integrated into a working model that resonated with both the form and content of their work.

The final set of sessions (sessions 11 to 17) concerned the production of this grand metaphor. This involved all participants thematically coding the material contained in the summaries and then sharing these in joint sessions. Session 11 was a difficult session; the volume of material generated appeared daunting and particularly for practitioners, the prospect of having to read and code such a large amount of text alongside busy and demanding practice schedules appeared overwhelming. It was tempting at this point to let the researchers take the data away and work on it, bringing it back with the analysis complete and ready for discussion. However, the model we were developing in this project was collaborative inquiry, and this required that all parties participated in all facets of the research. While recognising the difficulties of

balancing busy practice along with the demands of learning how to analyse research data, it was critical that practitioners participated fully in this stage. This stage took longer than we had planned, and involved sessions where practitioners worked on their own with the data; where they worked together as a practice team; and also sessions where we met as a full group (practitioners and researchers). Summaries of these meetings were compiled; they focused primarily on abstracting concepts out of the data and working these into coherent explanations of different aspects of the theory. Towards the end of these sessions, the practice team took up the challenge of integrating these sets of explanations into a whole and then presenting them to the researchers. It was from this detailed discovery process that the practitioners developed the spinafex metaphor, which the researchers then developed into a preliminary draft document. The metaphor of the spinafex integrated the working concepts we had developed and provided a creative, conceptual framework that allowed practitioners to explain how they worked, why they worked in these ways and the types of effects they saw their work having. The process of finalising the spinafex was iterative, involving numerous drafts and redrafts to finally produce the theory of change.

The process that emerged from this project was consistent with the process Te Aroha Noa uses to work with families and whānau. The emergent, responsive process created an environment within which reflection of a deeper nature could occur; practitioners moved from reciting their practice to talking about how they became their work (Reeler, n.d.). Respect and patience, the things that they repeatedly told us featured in their work, needed to be present in the research process for this type of talking to happen. A critical part of this project was learning about the significance of the relationship; to practitioners it was the basis upon which they engaged with families and whānau, and when we reviewed reports from parents collected in other research we had undertaken at the Centre, we learnt that they understood the work they were engaged in with practitioners through the relationship as well. They did not experience the intervention, they experienced the relationship.

GLOSSARY

Ako – the idea that everyone is simultaneously a teacher and a learner. It highlights the reciprocity and interconnected nature of human relationships.

Distal outcomes – changes that may happen at some distance from the intervention; they are often the changes that a whānau or family may recognise happening long after they have ceased to be involved with a service. They are therefore harder to identify and measure than proximal changes; they are also more likely to be longer-lasting.

Feedback loops – action reflection process that incorporates an ongoing cycle of change that is created through reflection on practice where new learning feeds continuously into practice development

Hui – the Māori word for meeting.

Kaupapa – philosophy, principle or policy.

More – Te Aroha Noa developed the idea of 'more' to help explain its kaupapa. 'More' relates to adding value in an exponential way to the development of people and the community. 'More' refers to the potential to transform environments by recognising that actions have effects beyond their immediate impact. As part of the kaupapa, the principle of 'more' signifies the way in

which Te Aroha Noa seeks to influence places, people and systems beyond the organisation and the Highbury community.

Praxis – the process of putting theoretical knowledge into practice.

Proximal change – immediate changes or changes that can be observed happening relatively soon after an intervention. They are typically easier to identify and therefore to measure, than distal outcomes. They may be relatively short-lived.

Reflexive practice – activities that bend back on to the subject and evaluation of the self in relationships between clients and social workers; that is, reflection on practice which then influences the practitioner's work with the client.

Theory of change – a theory that allows providers to explore and then explain how they understand their role in and contribution to whānau and family change. Theories of change allow providers to focus on the diffuse, less easy-to-measure dimensions of practice as well as specific programme components that create the conditions under which families are more likely to embark upon and succeed at creating changes.

Whānau – a wider concept than just an immediate family made up of parents and siblings. It links people of one family to a common tipuna or ancestor.

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